

Ten children Ten weeks One Killer

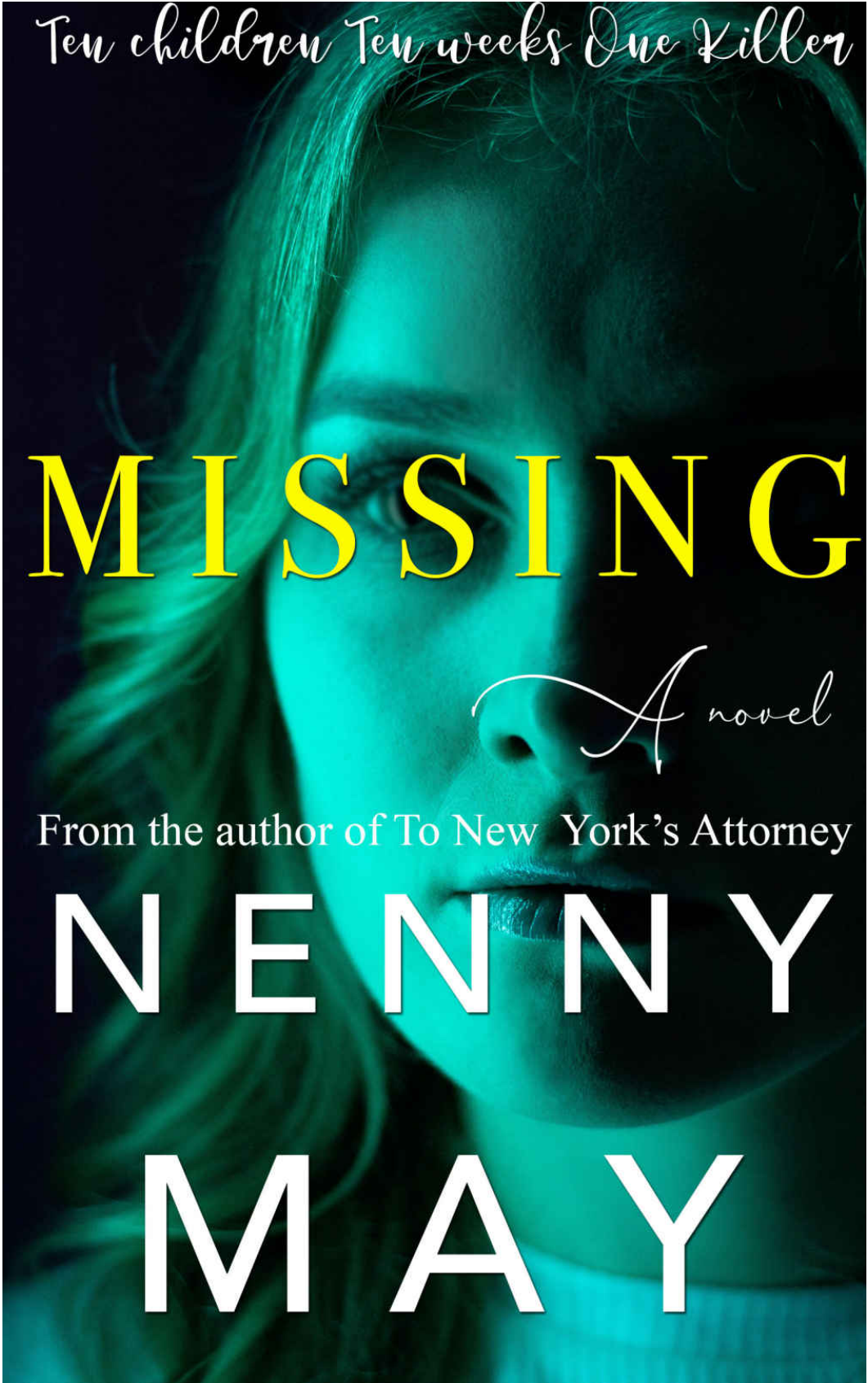
MISSING

A novel

From the author of *To New York's Attorney*

NENNY

MAY



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By

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A NOVEL

***Madison Miller is thrown in the middle
of a criminal investigation when her
neighbor's only son is kidnapped in a***

way much too similar to the way her son was kidnapped.

Ten children, ten weeks, one killer.

Abandoned bodies of ten-year-old boys have been turning up all over Charlotte, North Carolina and the inhabitants are petrified. Ten murders in ten weeks, all committed with a gunshot to the head, and still nobody has a clue who the deranged killer is.

Laid-off news reporter and part-time babysitter Madison Miller, is tired of receiving nothing but rejection on her résumé, and so, she delves into babysitting as a fulltime career. Little does she know just how this will affect her.

Being the only mildly trustworthy babysitter, she's entrusted with ten-year-old Ethan Daniels, only son of the now-barren couple, Lauren and Parker Daniels.

The boy goes missing, throwing Madison Miller into a thrilling panic and into the centre of the investigation. Her only clue, a call begging for forgiveness.

She enlists the help of courageous former detective Adam Walker, a long time neighbor.

Can Walker pull himself out of his rut and help Madison find answers before the deranged killer and his deadly gun claim another victim?

From the author of *To New York's Attorney*, Wattpad author Nenny May brings forth yet another thrilling mystery.

Books By Nenny

To New York's Attorney

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Contents

Prologue

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Epilogue](#)

Prologue

Alexander Hemmings needed to report the death of Oliver Weston, his tenth and final victim.

The evening air had been crisp, in the distance, the sun had begun to set, dark clouds rolled across the skies, they were a swirl of golden yellows and fading pinks. The night reeked of fast food and cigarettes, the wind whistled, dull against the blare of car horns and the sharp curses of agitated drivers. Providence road was more awake than Alexander Hemming's social life. He figured, he was never much of a social butterfly in the first place. It was a residential area, what were so many people doing roaming the streets? Was there always traffic in this part of town? And why was he so panicked? He just needed to make a call. He needed to breathe through the subtle ache in his head, to think. Alexander Hemmings much preferred the velvet wake of the night for a walk through the streets of Charlotte; he didn't have much of a choice in this situation. He worked with time and his colleague had thrown him enough curveballs.

He released a breath pushing farther, in the distance; he recognized the supermarket he'd earlier driven passed. His tongue ran over his bottom lip, the cut on it tasted of metal. Great, not only had the little retard put up quite a fight, he'd left Alex with a busted lip. With the evening accompanied the glimmering glow of the convenience store sign, and it all had to be in Alex's mind, but the florescent store lights seemed *that* much brighter. The closer he got the tighter the knots in his stomach seemed. He slowed his pace, his eyes probing the busy store. Through the doors and windows, he saw a line of customers waiting at the register. This had to

be some sort of joke, was there an apocalypse he hadn't heard about? Why were there so many damn people out grocery shopping in the middle of the goddamn week? Maybe he'd made a mistake coming all the way? No, his decisions were hardly ever wrong. Everything he'd done, every call, it was a weight off his shoulders. He stopped. He couldn't draw any attention to himself, and gasping for breath while looking homeless wasn't exactly going to keep people's eyes off him.

I need an ambulance, there's a boy... he's hurt. Alex thought again about what he would say, He hoped to whatever guardian angel that had gotten him this far that there wouldn't be too many curious ears and straying eyes. He'd always seemed to falter before an audience. He pushed the door open and slipped between the aisles. He would pick up some snacks; he would throw in a book as well. The knot tightened further, he would make the call, and then join the queue. His skin tingled; his nerves hadn't been this rattled the last time. There wasn't an audience the last time. The fierce glare of the convenience store lights didn't aid the cold sweat that ran down the side of his face. He knew this feeling; he dreaded it, not knowing what to do. No, he knew exactly what to do, he just couldn't do it with people watching, they would come after him if he didn't do it right. Okay, then he had to do it right, every line, every emotion; he would convey it like it was his first and last performance. He bit down on his tongue, heart hammering, he slid further down the aisles.

He wanted to run, to turn on his heel and hightail out those translucent doors, anyone could find Oliver Weston, and someone else could call in to report his body. The thought of someone else taking credit itched, he couldn't let that happen. He controlled this town, he'd single handedly driven fear through the streets and given it a home smack

dab in the middle of Charlotte. No measly tom-dick-and-harry was going to come in and ride the wave he'd created. Wouldn't it work in his favor if the police couldn't trace a pattern? He didn't know, neither did he want to. He had to do this, he'd trudged Oliver's body there, to Myers Park, he had to confess, to get it off his chest. He couldn't get his tongue tied, he couldn't implicate himself. He would mention the body, the bruises, if asked, he knew nothing about the pulse.

"Excuse me," A man coughed, he wasn't that much older than Hemmings, in the middle of his twenties with tattered grey-blond hair and tired, familiar eyes that had Alexander Hemmings skin crawling. He stepped to the side, deciding rather head straight for the phones at the back of the store. He didn't care for the foreplay, he didn't need the chips anyway and the book? Who was he kidding a drop-out like him wouldn't be caught dead near a book. *There's a body at Myers Park, it's Oliver Weston's.* He couldn't say that he needed to sound innocent, believable. He'd stumbled upon the body underneath a shrub by the dumpsters. What had he been doing there? It didn't matter, it was a 9-1-1 call and not a statement, he didn't need much of an alibi, just the facts.

The phones had clearly not been used in quite a while if the thick trails of cobwebs and the double coat of dust gave off any meaning. He reached for the closest one to him; he blew on the timeworn phone. He sneezed, *Shit!* There goes not drawing any attention to himself. He sneezed again. His eyes darted left and right, there was a kid not too far to his left, behind her father who couldn't seem to care any less, and she'd held him, Alex, in a dead stare. He turned away. He couldn't get distracted. He dialed 9-1-1. He listened.

"9-1-1 what's your emergency?"

A tear ran down his cheek, he coughed. "There's a boy, he's lying helpless in Myers Park, he's been shot." Did he regret everything he'd put Oliver through? A part of him did, but it had to happen, he was the last of them, the tenth victim.

Why did that leave Alex feeling worse than when he'd started his killing spree?

Chapter One

It was certain, Madison Miller was in a slump. She'd gone through yet another rejection E-mail. This time, it was her application for the position of an assistant reporter. She was practically an understudy, and they'd hauled her application over their shoulders, their only reply, Madison Miller could bet top dollar was an overused automated response apologizing that her résumé didn't meet company criteria. Well to that, their company criteria could kiss her buns for all she cared, if anything, she was a pinch hitter and it was their loss, even if they were the last well acknowledged news station within the city of Charlotte.

They were a three star station, what was she supposed to do? Stoop to applying to stations that could barely broadcast to a quarter of the city? Stations that received more hate mail than praise?

Forget heartbreak, rejection was worse! What was she going to tell her mother? Julia Miller in all her five-foot-eight glory packed a mouth on her. Madison's chest clouded, she would get an earful, she was sure of that, just as sure as she was that she'd heard that particular speech before. *When are you going to settle down with a good job? When are you going to saddle up a man and an income that didn't leave you wanting?* Julia would poke at these. Correction, Julia would shove it down Madison's throat. Her day hadn't even begun. She at least deserved her morning coffee, a dark swirl of ground beans, heavy cream and whatever else she could reach at the back of her barely stocked fridge.

She'd noticed it, her days had blurred together, like old melted ice cream she'd long overlooked. Her days were like

vanilla churned in with cherry bubblegum and dark chocolate, except her days weren't exactly as sweet. She looked away from her laptop screen noting that she still had at least a few hours before Julia's daily phone call, a habit the single mother had imbibed since the passing of her second husband.

Madison rose from her desk chair with a squeak, her limbs thrown over her head and lips parted as a yawn slipped. Her hands dropped to her sides. She needed an income and watching neighborhood kids for petty cash wasn't going to cut it, at least not anymore. She was almost thirty, she still had a few years till then, but she'd passed the twenty-five mark! She wasn't getting any younger. And besides, unemployment didn't suit her, and even still, Madison Miller wore it like an overcoat, heavy and warm. But how much longer till that look went out of style? How much longer till she could no longer reach for mere ground coffee at the back of her fridge? She needed a job, and receiving rejection letter after rejection letter from well known as well as lesser known news-stations wasn't all that motivating. No, it hurt; it burned slowly as her disappointment seeped through her pores. *What were they looking for that she didn't have? Was it a degree? She'd graduated from a community college! Was it talent? She was sure she could broadcast with enough emotion and je ne sais quoi to send any news stations ratings through the roof. So why couldn't she qualify as one of the heavy hitters?*

She'd easily become a puddle of self doubt, her own confusion and concern threatening to send her over the rails. Her rent would run out in less than a month, twenty-five days, and if she didn't find a stable source of income before that, she would be homeless. The thought alone, of having to crash on a neighbor's couch, of becoming a liability, sent a chill through her. She shook her head,

blinking. It was too early for this, much too early. She'd been homeless once before. She wasn't going back to that.

She decided rather to thrust the thought to the dark cobwebbed recesses of her mind and instead let her eyes travel about her living room, the morning was young, boring vigorously through her opened blinds, bathing her living room in a hue of gold and mellow blues. She turned her eyes to the television, she let it linger there. *Breaking News*, the banner beneath the news reporter blared in red. She'd seen it before. This wasn't the first station to carry the story. She hadn't heard the solemn words of the man with the microphone, she'd turned the volume to its lowest, but she could tell by the remorse in his eyes, the depth in his frown lines, that he was covering a rather well known case. It was the tale of yet another murder that left the city of Charlotte in a tremor. There was yet another murder that ached her bones. Ten year old boys were being targeted, kidnapped and killed. The aspiring journalist, Madison Miller was curious. *Why would young ten year old boys be the target? Were they just easy prey? Were they being molested then killed? Was there more depth to the deaths?* There had to be more that the media wasn't willing to divulge, and it was itching her to know. But it wasn't just her, as the television image panned out at a body of active protesters beckoning justice is sought for the lives of the ten kidnapped and killed boys of Charlotte, North Carolina.

Definitely standing around, glaring at a mute television screen wasn't going to give her the answers she wanted. No, she needed to go out and follow the story; but first, coffee. And with that thought in mind, she padded to her cabinets, pulling out a mug. From the drawers, she retrieved a spoon, and from the fridge, her last bag of ground coffee and heavy cream. How had she fallen so low? She could remember a time, ripe from college, she'd been taken in as a paid intern

for the WCCB, a station she was sure was going to haul her to the peak of her career. By twenty-five she was supposed to be a nationally recognized reporter, she had goals, she had a plan, and then she'd met Clive. Head reporter, he was loved like Lexington style barbeque. He'd noticed her, the new intern, and he'd pulled her with him up the career ladder, if only she'd known at the time that when he slumped, she would too, harder if she thought back to the sudden crash her career had endured.

With eyes that still longed for sleep, Madison stared dazed through her kitchen window at everything and at nothing, she saw early birds jogging by her building, teenagers running to catch the bus, she saw ignorance to the media's warnings, she saw life pushing ahead despite the threat that lurked in wait for another victim. There was a pattern, she'd noticed, the children were students of Cotswold Elementary, they were ten year old boys who were more outspoken if that article on Wikipedia had any truth behind it, they were boys too much like her little Tucker.

At the ping of her coffee machine, Madison filled her mug with hot brewed coffee, stirred in heavy cream to her heart's content and brought the steaming liquid to her lips. With her free hand, she reached for her phone. No one had replied to her babysitting Ad. Not only was she unemployed but it seemed her regular clients, mothers within her vicinity had begun to notice her dependence on her part time job. She refreshed her browser; she couldn't go through another day without money. She would result to borrowing, begging, to ringing Clive for anything he could offer. He'd already paid off three months of her rent since their divorce; she wasn't going to depend on him. This was going to be her month.

Her phone blared in her hand, her thoughts travelled to Clive, why would he be calling? It had been over two years since their divorce, but it felt like yesterday. Her eyes

squeezed shut, she tucked up thoughts of him. They could burden her in the dead of the night, but not during the day. Her eyes fluttered open. The ringing continued. She knew the number, and yet, she hadn't saved it. But she was sure, it wasn't Clive.

Picking the call, she made a mental note to do just that, to save it. Placing her mug down on the counter, she let her free hand hang akimbo on her waist. The voice on the other end was rushed, but in control, Madison couldn't quite decipher what the woman on the other end had been up to. "Maddy, Honey, it's Lauren, from down the street," Rushed her neighbor. She already knew that. Madison had known Lauren for quite a few weeks, not up to a month. The young mother had recently moved into the bungalow three blocks down from Madison's. "Our babysitter just cancelled on us, and we need someone to watch Ethan, I promise he's a good kid and he's not that hard to keep an eye on." Lauren rambled on. Madison pursed her lips, letting recollections of the bubbly ten year old Ethan Daniels float to the surface. He didn't seem like a handful, but he sure had the energy of a ballpark. "And besides, he kinda likes it when you come over," Lauren continued, chuckled. "I was asking him today who he would rather have watch him and he was like; Maddy, our neighbor with all the cool video games." *Ahh* yes, the video games Madison had inherited from the divorce. Clive had gotten more of the alimony, but she'd gotten the *Ps4*. "And I saw your Ad online today, it seems perfect don't you think?"

If she'd been asked five years ago where she saw her career heading, babysitting wouldn't have once crossed her mind. It wasn't an ideal career that brought the dough, but it was something, it just wasn't nearly enough. "I'll watch Ethan for you, you don't have to worry." Madison assured. "I just can't believe he remembered me after he schooled my ass in NFL

the other day?" She plastered a smile on her face, if Lauren were here, in her kitchen, she would know without a doubt it was forced. Offering one last fleeting glimpse at the television, Madison knew, she had a bad feeling about this. Then she thought, *what were the odds the boys were taken from the comfort of their own home?*

There was warmth in Lauren's tone as she laughed. "He's been bragging about that since you left," There was a pause, enough for seriousness to pour into the young mother's voice. "You're a lifesaver Maddie, does six-thirty work?" Madison thought for a moment, she didn't necessarily have anywhere to be through the day.

"Perfect." Madison confirmed, reminding herself just how much she needed the money. *It wasn't the best source of income but it was something.* She needed something so she wouldn't end up popping from couch to couch listening to her friends lament over just how long it had taken her to get back on her feet. She'd been in shambles then, she'd picked herself up. She wasn't going to let it happen again. The line went dead and Madison was once more left to her rambling thoughts.

She should have rejected the offer.

*

At about the same time Adam Walker had been returning from his jog around Bertonley Avenue, a state issued police car had been pulling up his driveway. The soft crunch of gravel beneath the intruding vehicle sent a dose of adrenaline and confusion through him. Frown lines graced Adam Walker's features. Two strides took him farther from his door and closer to the now parked car. He had to admit, an officer pulling up his drive way left him quite unsettled,

even if the man who climbed out and strode out and towards him was a face the farthest thing from unfamiliar.

"Hey, Y'all good down at Concord Mills or have you come to recruit an extra-hand?" Adam Walker said, an eyebrow perched up for the man that crossed his freshly mowed lawn and leaped up his porch steps. Ryan Gates didn't seem to be in a smiling mood or in much of a talking one either. Adam shrugged shoving his keys through his lock and pushing open his front door. "Can I interest you in a beer, some Cheerwine, maybe some tea?" Adam strode straight for his fridge. Gates could make himself at home in the living room or continue to shadow Adam Walker. It wasn't the first time the detective had dropped by unannounced. Adam didn't think he had it in him to do away with his former partner, if anything; Gates could be a link to his old position.

"Someone's been tipping people off that you're behind the murders of the ten-ten-year-old boys." Detective Ryan Gates said leaned against the counter by the window. *Shit!* It was too early for this, the sun had just risen, the blues in the sky were a rich baby hue and the birds on the power lines had chirped their vibrant tunes. Adam had cherished the morning, thrusting through the streets, his lungs burning despite the crisp breeze that kissed his arms and shins. Thinking back, he should have lavished more in the fact that he wasn't a potential murder suspect.

He looked back at the man in his kitchen. Ryan Gates looked...different to say the least, he seemed worn out, in a worse condition than before Adam had been coerced to leave the force. With bagged eyes and skin that yearned for a nice tan, the man looked more like a blood deprived vampire than a detective. Not that Adam was going to point that out. He wasn't sure what turn their relationship had taken since his removal.

"I guess I'll hold off on the beer for you then?" Adam pulled open his fridge and reached for a bottle of water. "I at least thought y'all bunch would have more...credible suspects?" Half the content of the bottle slid down his throat, partly out of thirst and partly an excuse to not concentrate on the fact that he was a primary suspect in the serial murders sending a tremor through Charlotte.

"Your brain must have taken more of a hit than we thought from that drug bust you handled over the summer," Adam shrugged placing the bottle on the counter by the fridge. "You're one of our key suspects, Walker." Gates pressed.

"Yeah, buddy, I think I got that." Adam gulped. The situation was yet to sit with him. Nope, he had enough going on already with the anniversary of Sarah's death rolling around, and Jamie Walker's financial turmoil. There wasn't just enough emotional room for it. "Okay...Why me though?" He managed nonchalantly. It didn't seem like Gates was going to be much help filling-in the blanks.

Adam heard a noise, a grumble; his stomach. He could stand there, sweaty, deliberating whether or not he would be hauled against his better judgment for questioning, or he could rustle up some breakfast. Eyes of spring greens raided his kitchen... there wasn't exactly much to work with on the breakfast front. But there were leftovers and he would continue to live on them until his situation got better. Until he hit a home-run and got his position back as homicide detective Concord Mills.

It wasn't much of a secret that Adam Walker needed money and doing one or two odd jobs here and there, tending to the Young's garden for a couple bucks and fixing up the Thomas's busted up kitchen sink for less than minimum wage, all while diving head first into his savings wasn't doing much in keeping him afloat. Contacting Jamie would

have been an option, although with his brother's job practically walking the plank, Adam wasn't too sure Jamie would be able to do much to help his situation.

Adam nudged his thoughts aside. He ambled for the cabinets. Pulling out a plate, he turned to his guest. "Want some grub?" Gates shrugged.

"I want you to take this seriously, Walker. Your ass could be convicted of a capital offence of which the highest penalty is death." Gates sought shelter for his hands in his pockets. He seemed exasperated. Maybe if he accepted anything Adam offered, he wouldn't feel so worn down.

"You know what we should do?" Adam suggested clutching the handle of the fridge. "We should take a beat and head down to that bar, the one downtown that we always went to after a long ass day, they could fix us up some nice Fried green tomatoes topped with pimento cheese and you and I can catch up just like old times."

"You know, Walker old-buddy, I would but... if you haven't noticed, there are children being kidnapped, tortured and murdered. I think I have my hands full." Gates looked impatient.

If Gates didn't want to get some beers and grub, Adam wouldn't push it.

"And why are you telling me that I'm a suspect? Aren't you worried I'll take off for Mexico?" Tugging the fridge door open, Adam reached in for the tuna sandwich he'd earlier overlooked. Dang! It was frozen, warmed in the microwave, the bread would slump. There wasn't better option, it was old defrosted tuna or hunger and Adam knew what it was like to be hungry, the tuna sandwich would have to do.

"You and I both know you're not behind this, kids aren't your style." Adam chuckled. He turned to the microwave and shoved the sealed sandwich inside.

"Yeah, I'm more of a drug-lord kind of guy." Adam made reference to the event that cost him his seven-year career. Switching on the microwave, he took a step back.

"What I do know is that you haven't exactly been sitting around ignorant of these murders, and that's why I'm here." Of course, he wanted Intel. Adam's teeth glimmered. He had leverage.

"You want a lead," Ryan nodded with a click of his tongue. The detective pushed himself upright. "Well I'm sorry bud, this isn't my case, I'm not a cop anymore remember?"

Ryan huffed. "Don't think I haven't been keeping tabs on you, Walker, and last I checked, you've made more visits to Cotswold Elementary than normal considering you don't have a kid enrolled there." A grin spread over Adam's face, wide and open, showing his egg-white teeth. He couldn't put much past his old partner.

"I don't even have a kid." Adam leaned against his marble counter. His grin wiped clean. "Think you can work out way for me to get back into uniform?" His gaze leered to his old friend.

"We've talked about this, Walker, there wasn't anything I could do then and there surely isn't anything I can do now." Adam nodded. "I will keep trying for your sake. But for now, I need something I know your field operation skills can give me."

"There isn't much, Gates, I tell ya, the media already covered fairground, and your team is aware of the basics; these children were killed execution style by a .38 special,

rope burns on their wrists suggest hostages, and hand marks burned into their tender flesh suggest torture." Ryan Gates groaned pacing the small kitchen, he stopped.

"If I wanted an overview, Walker, I would have turned on Channel 9, give me the good stuff." Gates pulled out his phone. "Give me some of them dark web gossip." Gates stared at the screen of his phone, eyes squinted, he always did need glasses. "I know you have a suspect for me, I just need a name." Adam thought for a moment. He was making a mistake. Diving head first into this case without the backing of the CMPD would be shooting himself in the leg, and he wasn't even sure this was going to get him back on the force. What he needed was a deal, to strike a deal with someone so high up in the force that his weeks of digging into a child murder case wouldn't be in vain. "Exonerate yourself, Walker." Ryan urged.

It was a wonder why after all this time, Adam hadn't chosen to take the high road and accept his removal. He hadn't once moved on from his identity as a homicide detective for the CMPD. His savings were *this* close to running out, he needed a deal and he needed it immediately. Adam shrugged.

"Sorry buddy, I've got nothing." Ryan cursed.

Chapter Two

Madison Miller gaped upon the restless boy bounding and lurching about his home. He leaped with the zeal of a field team. From where she'd sat by the dining room, underneath the Daniel's crystal chandelier, listening to something she'd thrown in the disk player by The Five Saints, she had to admit, she envied the ten-year-old. He was born into an easy wealth, one she'd only merely graced with her fingertips before being tugged down by a weight, an unethical work affair.

Good lordie, she envied a ten-year-old! When exactly had she stooped this low?

The night, young as it were, reeked of regret, one that left an uncomfortable churning in the depths of Madison's stomach. She could taste it; the bitterness of having to admit her defeat, of having to crawl back on her knees to Julia Miller. *Urrg!* She could picture Julia's coy smile, she could hear the explosive laughter overpowering the delicate clanking of ice chilling her mothers' mid-afternoon shot of cheap Jack Daniels.

"You don't dance?" The young boy asked, his hands thrown in the air, as his lean legs kicked aimlessly and his small waist wiggled. He was off beat, off pace, but there was a glimmer in his eyes, a joy. She'd seen it before; over two years ago on a ten year old Tucker Miller who'd insisted on seeing the light in every darkness. Running a hand through her hair, Madison cracked a smile. She did many things but dancing wasn't one of them... neither was admitting that once again Julia Miller had been right.

"Why don't you try something new?" Julia had asked over the phone during her regularly scheduled afternoon call. It

hardly lasted more than five minutes and when it did, Madison was often preoccupied over the stove, merely offering off the bat 'mhmm's' and 'yeah's' here and there. "I didn't want to have to say this, Honey Plum, but your journalism career died when you started following that...Clive Grey."

"Green, Momma, Clive Greene." Madison corrected. She'd been agitated, still sporting a wounded ego from her newly-acquired rejection e-mail. "I married him for heaven sakes, you were at the wedding, the least you could do is remember his name."

"It doesn't change my point, Darling. He killed your career as a journalist."

"It's not like I'm trained for much else, Momma, and besides, I have a kid to watch, I can't be late because I'm discussing my career's death with my mother,"

"You shouldn't be doing that," Julia muttered honestly. She wasn't satisfied and she made it known in her brusque tone. She wanted more from her daughter, she expected more, the resonating problem being; her pressure might compel Madison to stoop lower than she would be willing to. Madison much like Julia had self-respect; the apple didn't fall too far from the tree. And because of that, Madison wasn't willing to waste her talents on a two... or worse, one-star news station. "You shouldn't be going over there. You should be venturing out for news stations that will recognize your talents." Julia was right, she was hardly ever wrong, and even still, Madison was hard-headed, she hadn't wanted to hear it, at least not at that moment.

"We will talk about this eventually, but not right now, I'm going to be late." It was safe to say Madison would be facing the music of hanging up on her mother during their next call.

She heard a cough. She'd zoned out. She wouldn't dance, but she could cheer him on. "Dance till your heart is filled, I'm all danced out." She returned to the computer she'd opened, skimming her eyes over a vast Google search of available jobs in Charlotte.

"What's going on, Maddy? I might not understand a lot of things, like math... And climate change, but I know there's something on your mind." He joined her by the table. She coughed a laugh, a small one. Was she going to confide her middle-aged-crisis with a ten-year-old? She was tempted. What good would it do her precisely? "Don't laugh. I'm a good listener." There was a silence that seemed to stretch forever.

"Thanks for trying, Ethan. Really, but you have homework. Don't think your Momma didn't fill me in on your habit of leaving your homework till the last possible moment." The scowl he'd worn tugged at her. He remained rooted in place. No, he needed a firm hand. He wasn't her kid, and even if he were, she couldn't turn a blind eye to everything. She shouldn't have. "Go get started, if there's anything you need help with, I will be here."

His hesitance to retire to his room was obvious. He'd trudged his legs behind him like logs, his grumbling muffled by the clear brilliance of Elton John blaring through the home theatre system.

Her gaze returned to her search. She had a drive, a goal. She needed a career, not a job. Was there sincerely nothing left of her journalism career? And was she too hard headed to see that? If she wasn't a journalist, what was she? Could she make it far in the acting career? No, she wasn't trained for that, she wasn't trained for much else.

She'd made a promise, driven by the agonizing guilt of living off the sweat and tears of another; she'd sworn that she'd only leach off the woman that had taken her off the

street till she'd gotten back on her feet. She was standing, with a job, but she wasn't walking, she'd hit a dead end, and she needed to reevaluate her decisions, her choices.

Journalism had chased her to where she had her back against the wall watching neighbourhood children for petty cash. Acting wasn't her forte... but what was?

There was a loud crash; it was the sound of glass shattering; a window. It was accompanied quickly by a shriek, it didn't last long. Her eyes broadened, her breathing hitched, it was catching up, the fear.

It was clear the Daniels were well off, from what Madison could tell by the eloquent designs and paintings hanging off their walls; there was even something by Edvard Munch! Madison wasn't exactly sure who he was but if his name was scribbled in cursive at the bottom of a centrepiece, then he had to be notable. The Daniels were people of artistic detail and immense wealth, a break-in to their property was expected. Although that did nothing to aid the crippling panic that trickled into her veins.

Hurdling out of her seat, Madison let her legs heavy as lumber, carry her towards the noise; Ethan Daniels room. The door left ajar cast a white beam into the sultry darkness of the ten-year-old-boy's room. With her breath held, she pushed it further. The achingly slow creek of it swinging open left a sense of dread laced deep into her gut. She flipped the light switch bathing the room in a shimmering brightness. "Ethan?" She screamed. Silence resonated the room. It was a mess of flung clothes and long abandoned leftovers. Towards the window was his desk, the chair flipped on its side, his books opened on their backs. "Ethan!" She voiced again. None of his windows had been shattered. Where had the noise come from then? And where in the name of all things good was Ethan Daniels? There had to be a logical explanation for the noise. She darted towards the

kitchen, there was nothing; she made her way to the bathroom, the laundry room, all the while calling out for Ethan who'd chosen this moment to remain deathly silent. This worried her. This frightened her to the point she was sure she was going to throw up. She scurried into the master bedroom. She heard it again, the same loud crash. She wasn't hearing things. No, the noises were too real. She ran back to Ethan's room.

That's where the second noise had come from; the window by his desk. It hadn't been shattered before. No, he'd been in the room. She'd missed him. The wind whipped at his curtains, sending them dancing. She shook her head, this couldn't be happening. "Ethan!" She climbed his pinewood desk poking her head out the shattered window. His room much like that of Lauren and Parker Daniels was located on the ground floor of the house, anyone could have walked along the edge of the building, shattered the young boy's window and taken him hostage. She looked left, and then right, there wasn't any sign of movement. It was too dark to tell. Where had the first noise come from? Why hadn't she noticed the broken window initially?

She pulled her head back in, heading towards the front door. Her hands trembled violently. She couldn't find her voice, and yet, she'd reached for her phone. She dialed 9-1-1. She'd reported him missing, she'd reported a break-in. She stopped with her hands on the knob of the front door. She listened for footsteps. "Ethan!" She blared once more. Silence.

Pulling the door open, she darted out of the house, taking a left towards where his room window had been shattered. The dark musty corner reeked of dog piss. She scrunched her nose, screaming for the ten-year-old boy. *Shit!* She should talked to him. She should have kept him occupied in the dining room. What was she thinking? She wasn't thinking.

What was she going to tell Lauren and Parker? Good lord she was going to go to jail for negligence. She had a duty of care to make sure nothing happened to Ethan while his parents were out of the picture. She'd failed. Oh lordie, so this was it, she would die in prison? She should have listened to Julia, she shouldn't have taken up Lauren's offer.

Ethan!" She'd forced at the top of her lungs. She didn't want to worry whether or not she was heading the right way, she ran, down the street that was oddly unoccupied for a Friday night in Charlotte. Was this some kind of nightmare hauling her back to everything she'd felt one year ago when she'd lost Tucker? "Ethan Daniels?" She tried again, once more stuffing the thoughts at the back of her mind. She was going to go crazy if she didn't find him. That wasn't even an option; not finding him.

She'd had a bad feeling about this; she should have listened when she'd had the chance. She hadn't.

. . .

Adam Walker had a suspect for the murder of the ten-ten-year-old boys. He'd had one since the murder of Gibson Knight-- the eighth recorded victim--he just couldn't let the CMPD get their grubby hands on him, at least not yet. He needed a deal, to bargain with someone high enough on the force to get him back into uniform; someone like the Mecklenburg County Sheriff. Gnawing on the idea, Walker sprung to his feet. The frigid chill of wood kissing his bare feet sent a chill running up his spine. Adam leaped for his slippers. He could probably get an in with the sheriff through

Officer Gerald Hopkins. Although they hadn't talked in a while, it wasn't something a couple jars of moonshine couldn't solve.

He wandered down the hall, his head in the clouds thinking instead about his suspect once more. Alexander Hemmings, a man if Adam could, he would scrutinize with a close intensity. Hemmings was an offender, a national nuisance who'd more than once engaged in petty theft, DUI, simple assault, disorderly conduct, and the list just went on and on. Adam didn't have much linking Hemmings to the murders, but he had a gut feeling and he was hardly ever wrong... besides the time his gut had him de-badged. Good lord knew Walker was nearing the end of his rope with this case. Unemployed and trailing a serial-child-murder case, it was going to take its toll. Adam could only wish he knew when he would hear the final snap.

What had once been a grand oriental style home, furnished with the finest polished oak-wood, perfumed with the tender affection of a newlywed couple, had easily become a mere resting spot whistling through the night with the music of Adam's loneliness. Walker's house was welcoming from the open door to the wide hallway. It's what she'd loved so much about the decor. Upon the walls were photographs of her; Sarah Walker, so obviously loved. The floor was an old-fashioned parquet with a blend of deep homely browns and the walls were the greens of summer gardens meeting a bold white baseboard. The banister was a twirl of a branch, tamed by the carpenter's hand, it's grain flowing as water might, in waves of comforting woodland hues. Under the lamp-shine it was nature's art, something that soothed right to the soul. She'd overseen the decoration herself after their wedding. She hadn't lived long enough to lavish in the fruits of her labour.

Slumping lazily on the couch with a thud, Adam let his eyes flutter shut and his mind whirl. Why ten year old boys? The simple question had baffled him from the kidnap and murder of Tyler Shaw, the first recorded victim of Hemmings, a dark haired ten-year-old with the heart of a thousand suns. And why had Hemmings targeted ten boys? Was there a specific number he was trying to reach? And why had he called-in to report each gruesome death? And why hadn't the CMPD picked up on the calls? Why hadn't Gates? If he'd spent as much time trailing Adam as he implied, he wouldn't have to solicit a name from Adam, he would know as much as his former partner. Adam wasn't ready to let Gates take the shine for his big hit.

"Trace the damn call and pin the Motherfucker!" Adam had suggested over the phone two weeks ago. He'd felt a burst of enthusiasm, a gush of excitement; he'd thought then, at that point, this would all be over, the deaths, the bodies piling up and the look of despair on shattered parents, he'd believed then that all it took was a push of a button. It was more than that. It was far from over.

"The calls were made from payphones all over the city." Adam knew what that meant, the CMPD had nothing. No, they had bodies and a whistle blower that just seemed to love payphones. *Shit!* He was just as close as the CMPD to bagging this nutcase, and that is to say, they were back to base. He reached for his laptop from the coffee table, nestling it over his lap.

Adam couldn't beat his chest and claim to know too much, but he had a gut feeling the man he'd trailed from Cotswold Elementary wasn't exactly... clean. The man, Alexander Hemmings had paid more visits to the school than the staff, and he seemed to have his visits timed, from there about 2:15 P.M., he would sit by a bench, the one closest to the parking lot underneath a tired pine oak tree, and he would

leer, with his phone in his hands, sometimes, he would smoke a cigarette and then almost precisely, by about 4:00 P.M., he would leave. His visits were daily, he was often cloaked in a haggard hoodie and worn washed jeans. The old hand-me-down computer came to life with a provoking slowness.

Adam had a ballpark figure of the number of calls Hemmings had made to the CMPD, calls Adam had eavesdropped on. According to a source on the inside, there was a call almost punctual from a frantic male, he'd call reporting the lifeless bodies that were often coiled beneath a bush or trudged up from Briar creek.

But Adam had a backdoor slider, he had something, something Gates had unknowingly confirmed that the CMPD needed, he had a name. The CMPD was trapped between a rock and a hard place, and man if he didn't know a thing or two about that. He'd made the right decision relying on his instincts, even if they hadn't always been there for him. They were right this time, and right now, he needed to make a trip down to his old precinct in West Boulevard. He would pay Officer Hopkins a surprise visit.

Adam glimpsed the unnecessarily large grandfather clock that had been snuggled in the corner of the room, 7:12 P.M., he could still meet up with Hopkins. His phone blared; shoving his computer aside, he dove for it. "Adam? Adam... It's Madison, Madison Miller from down the street... I know we haven't spoken in forever, but I... I wouldn't be calling if this wasn't an emergency." It had been quite a while since he'd heard from Madison, but he didn't quite like the gut-churning fear that coiled at the back of her voice or the thrilling words that slipped from her lips. "It's Ethan, Ethan Daniels, he's missing." He listened into the rasp in her voice.

"What do you mean he's missing?" He kicked off the well-worn bedroom slippers he'd thrown on and hopped towards

his boots by the door.

"I think he was kidnapped, Adam, that's what I mean by missing." He overlooked her sharp tone. "I was watching him, and there was a break-in...he's gone and the police don't seem to be responding... I can't do this alone... please." He gulped a breath. No, Hemmings couldn't be coming after their neighbourhood children as well, sure, Ethan fit his victim selection down to a tee, but it made no sense, each victim had been taken from within the vicinity of Cotswold Elementary, this had to be something else.

"Did they take anything else?" She paused; there was a noise, a cry. Had she been crying?

"What?"

"I want to know if this is a robbery gone wrong or a... kidnapping." He reached for his keys in a bowl atop an old tattered dresser, and tugged open the top drawer, reaching for his Glock 26 9mm sub-compact 10 round pistol and a strip of bullets, the phone balanced between his shoulder and ear. Madison Miller was silent for the longest time. He listened closer, absentmindedly loading the weapon in his grip. There were noises, background noises; for one, he could hear the whooshing of cars darting to and fro. Where was she? "Madison, work with me here, did they take anything else from the house? And where are you?"

"Hartness Avenue." God-damn-it! She wasn't supposed to leave, Ethan could still be there in the premises, and on top of that, the trespassers could come back. She wasn't supposed to leave the vicinity until the police got there.

"I'm heading down to the Daniels' home right now, get back there; I'll give Lauren and Parker a ring on my way there." He heard it again, the same strangled cry. He didn't wait to ask further questions, but rather cut the call and shoved his

phone into his pockets, and bouncing on the balls of his feet, he bolted through his front door.

Hemmings better not touch a hair on Ethan Daniels.

Chapter Three

Charlotte Mecklenburg Police Department Westover Division had been notified of Ethan Daniels case. Madison, in a state of panic had called more times than she could recall. Her stomach roiled, she was going to be sick, she knew it, she would lean over and dump out the contents of her stomach. She didn't let that happen, not quite yet. She was never really good at handling situations. The Daniels had left their son in her custody, her care, it was only fair, decent that they heard of his disappearance from her. So she'd called, she'd tried with her eyes sweeping the streets of Hartness avenue to beat Adam Walker's attempt to get in touch with the couple. She should have listened to her mother. Julia Miller could be a handful at times, but she was hardly wrong, and lordie lord how Madison wished this was one of the times her mother had been wrong. she couldn't help it, the wave of regret that hung over her like a potential tsunami. She shouldn't have taken Lauren's offer; she shouldn't have let her pride shove her off base. Oh how she wished she'd gone after those two-star news stations now.

It was happening again, the break-in, the kidnapping, all at once. But this time, it wasn't her son. It wasn't her little Tucker, It was Ethan Daniels, the boy with a recurring smile, the boy she'd opted to be responsible for. Did it worry her more because it was someone else's son? She wasn't sure. She wasn't thinking clearly enough to make that decision. Would Lauren blame her for the break-in? Yes, because she was in charge. Because she'd taken up the offer to watch a ten-year old boy in a town where ten year-old boys were kidnapped and killed, their bodies turning up all over the city of Charlotte, with a hollow bullet hole in the middle of

their wrinkle-free foreheads. Lauren would blame Madison because Lauren was a mother, one that would be fear-stricken, devastated. And then it hit Madison, she was still yet to inform the family.

Madison's steps drew to a sudden stop, she caught her breath, her eyes squeezed shut. She had to go back. Back to their home. Back to where she suspected police cars would line, their red and blue lights circling. She imagined getting there, her neighbors would be by the front of the building, some by their doors curious eyes peeking, lips whispering. She wouldn't tell the family, not yet. She wouldn't burden their outing, lord knows she would have wanted some more moments left in the dark; she would have wanted to continue even just for a few minutes longer, to believe that her son was asleep in his bedroom, before being hauled into the unfortunate kidnapping of her son Tucker Miller. Her terror mounted with each persistent memory. She thought of his laugh, his inquisitive chatter, she was tugging on the closet door of memories she'd kept locked for too long. Tucker was gone, he'd been gone too long, and yet his memories seeped through the cracks in the locked closet door, crippling her each time. Madison squeezed her eyes tighter, till there were little white spots dancing behind her eyelids. Didn't her hesitance to contact the Daniels mean Adam would get in touch with the family before she did? Had he already gotten a hold of them?

She couldn't move; she knew, her fear held her in place. She didn't have the time to remain paralyzed with dread, no, she could do that later, she didn't know when a later would be, or what a later really meant because with Tucker, she'd believed in a later that was nothing more than an empty promise, a lie. Her heart lurched.

Her eyes snapped open, her head whipped to her left, her concentrated ears had picked up on scurrying footsteps, her

heart continued to hiccup, it fell. It wasn't Ethan Daniels. It wasn't a masked murder making away with him, no it was a druggie scampering into an alleyway; he looked homeless. It was time to head back. She would talk to the police, she needed eyes, as many as she could gather, she needed the community, she needed Ethan.

. . .

Madison Miller looked at the officer who'd strayed farther and farther away from her through hooded eyes. She'd glowered at his back; broad, uniform clad. He stopped by his colleagues. She saw their lips move, she had little an idea what they were talking about. She hoped to whatever spirits out there, to whatever supreme force, that they wouldn't hesitate sending out a search team, that they wouldn't shove this case under the carpet like they'd implied. Her reliance on police efforts had long diminished since Tucker Miller's case. They'd claimed he was a runaway, that they needed twenty-four hours to trudge by before they could consider his case that of a missing person. Those twenty-four hours were always the most crucial.

The night sky above was a shadow barely driven by the lights glaring down from the surrounding buildings and streets lamps. Madison looked to it, to the poetry of stars, she could feel it, the single tear that ran down her cheek. Was that hopelessness? No, she'd felt that before. This was something else, it twisted her gut, wobbled her knees, and filled her palms with a clammy-ness. She had hope, maybe that's why it hurt more, because she hadn't lost hope, not when Ethan was out there, waiting to hit her with that smile of his that didn't seem to falter.

What she saw, the calmness hurt. What she heard, the mumbles of her neighbors sent a panic running through her. They'd said they couldn't treat the situation like any of the serial murders that had occurred within the span of ten weeks. This was different. Similar, but different. The victim was a ten-year-old male. To Madison, those were the specifications, she hadn't heard anything more, there had never been information leaked about hair-color, blood-type, there didn't seem to be more this killer sought than mere ten-year old boys within the city of Charlotte.

There have been ten reports, ten missing children, ten bodies turning up at various parks and playgrounds in Charlotte, none of these deceased children were taken from their homes.

He looked back at her, the officer with the broad uniform clad back, his eyes, as brown as they were seemed distant, unfocused, almost lost in thought. She felt as if he were slapping his words back in her face. They were treating Ethan's case as a kidnapping. There were signs of forced entry, from Ethan's bathroom window, a bathroom she didn't even know about. She should have known, he wouldn't have been taken if she had. That was the first crash. The clatter of broken glass. There were signs of a struggle. And there was an exit, his bedroom window. He'd been the target, but for how long?

Could the officer with the unfocused eyes be onto something? Could Ethan's case be nothing but a mere kidnapping? And even if it was, she hadn't heard anything back about a search crew. She didn't want to pry as if she were the one conducting the investigation, but Madison was the picturesque illustration of curiosity. She had questions that seethed, she needed answers.

How was this going to impact her reputation? She'd lost a kid, twice! Good lordie she hoped Ethan didn't turn out like

Tucker had; he hadn't been shot but he'd been strangled three days into his hostage. He was found almost immediately. When that gets out her only source of livelihood would be a thing of the past. Mothers would run from her as if she had the plague. She'll be benched from news reports if she ever gets picked up by even a one-star news station.

She let her legs carry her across the driveway, down to the curb; she met the officer with the unfocused brown eyes. The tag on his shirt read Todd. She dampened her lips, her heart leaped. "When is the search crew going to be here?" She posed the question to Todd. He had this un-shaking frown.

"Ma'am I'm going to need you to relax," He placed a hand on her shoulder, it was endearing, it was the last thing she needed at the moment. Was her panic that prominent? That obvious? "We have reached out for back-up and have a search committee on its way from headquarters, the entire area will be surveyed, in the meantime, I need to know whether or not you've contacted the family?"

She'd been avoiding this for much too long. She would tell them.

. . .

Madison Miller paced the lot. She couldn't help it, her bottom lip drawn between her teeth and eyes darting every-which-way, she relayed her firm tone, her explosive laughter at the thought confiding in him. The guilt ate her up from the inside out. It was torture; it wasn't going to bring him back. No, she needed to do something more than pace, more than wait, more than trust in the police officers that seemed too laid-back for her comfort. She'd called, notified Lauren Daniels and her husband Parker of the break in. She'd told them about Ethan. She hadn't gone into much detail, she didn't have it in her. They hadn't bothered with a reply, at

least not to her, but they hadn't cut the call. No, she'd heard their frantic screeching; she'd listened, hurt to the curses and soft sobbing that emanated from the phone. She could bet a finger and each one of her toes, that Lauren had forgotten having Madison on the line. She wasn't bothered by it.

She could picture it, Lauren Daniels would have the phone in her hand, stumbling out of her chair in whatever restaurant they'd ended up, Parker seemed to her like a big spender, she didn't doubt it would be anything less than Alexander Michel's. Lauren wouldn't bother with her purse, but Parker would spot it, quiet, in shock, he would sling it over his shoulder and trail his frantic wife to the car and with a voice tinged with a blazing sadness, she would look to him and tell him again, There was a break-in, Parker, Ethan was taken.

As vivid an imagination as Madison had, which was nothing short of a mental film, she couldn't quite guess what Parker's reaction would be. As loving as he seemed towards his wife, he was reserved, at least around Madison. He didn't just come off to her as a man with many words, would he be in shock? Would he reassure Lauren that everything would be fine and that she was probably overreacting? Would he panic? Or would he curse at Madison the whole ride back to their apartment?

Madison squeezed her eyes shut. She shook her head, and when she opened it, she wasn't alone. Before her stood a face that was just as familiar as it was unique. She knew the man before her as much as she'd known her college professors, physically with only a glimmer into their personal lives. She'd heard about the man towering over her from gossip in Panera Bread the chic cafe in the village. The tight space filled with the bustle of eager employees and idle listening ears wasn't particularly the most suitable place to

air dirty laundry, and yet, many of her neighbours seemed to find a way.

Adam Walker looked to her like he'd escaped a James-Bond movie. He was toned in a way that gave his bright skin a more solid form, and had an expression that had goosebumps running down her arms. She could only describe it as a smouldering look. He also had these eyes, they seemed like they'd seen death, but she wasn't sure. She was relieved, not entirely. But he was a familiar face she could count on, and absurdly, he was her rabbit's foot. He cleared his throat. "These Pussies aren't going to get to the bottom of this." His words were a whisper in the wind, as if only intended for Madison's ears. His accent wasn't hard to pick-up on; he was southern, but not completely. His accent hinted a Pacific Northwest pitch. "They've had ten weeks; these boys are still going missing." He continued. Madison listened intently. She was shaken-up, agitated that the so-called search crew that Todd had mentioned were yet to arrive. Maybe to them, this was different from the murder of the ten ten-year-old boys, but to her, it the same, she could just feel it, and it scared her to hell and back. This was valuable time that could have been directed into doing something, anything rather than just waiting. The officers on the scene weren't many, but they had neighbours, they could have started a search team, they could have covered some ground within this time. "I assume you got in touch with the Daniels?" Madison nodded. They would be here, she didn't know when, but she would face them. "I can't exactly tell whether or not something had been snatched along with the boy, but further inquiry into the family's inventory should shed some light." He talked with a calm Madison envied. At least until he uttered; "I know something," Adam trailed off.

"Like what?" She asked when she noticed he wasn't going to say anything more. He couldn't just leave her like that,

claiming to know something about the killing of the ten ten-year-old boys and the kidnapping of Ethan Daniels. She needed to know what the media had been concealing, what the police knew that she didn't. She had little a reason to doubt him, after all they'd been neighbours since she'd hightailed her eighteen-year-old touchy out of her mamma's cosy three bedroom and into her dear late aunt Denis's condo. She'd also learned through eavesdropping at Panera Bread that he'd once been a detective, and it might have been an exaggeration, but he'd been one of the youngest and one of the best detectives that precinct had seen in quite a while. According to one of Madison's neighbours, Alice Sanders, he'd worked for Concord Police Department - Southwest Precinct At Concord Mills for over a year before being completely stripped of his badge and released from his duties on the force. Of course, that day, the day Madison had learned of this, she'd been tossed and tousled by her curious mind. What could he have done to be stripped of his badge? She'd thought. Not once had she bothered to ask. But she was veering off point; he was yet to give her any reason to question his credibility. He peered over his shoulder, once to the left where Todd and his colleagues leaned against a state-issued police car, and then once to the right towards a line of buildings outside where people gathered. He looked back at her, at Madison. He'd merely offered her a glance and her skin began to blanch. She felt it, like he was going to weigh her down with frightening news, a worrisome discovery.

"From what I found, we can trace this killer, and I can bet, we can estimate his next move too." Did Madison want to know this killer's next move?

. . .

"They're clearly not going to do a thing." Alice Sanders mumbled to herself. Out beneath the glaring stars, caressed

by the evening breeze, she couldn't seem to keep her feet planted in place, the stubborn things had a mind of their own! And that's not to mention her always listening ears! Something bad had to have happened for police cars to gather the Daniels home. Word on the street, their ten year old was taken. Dear God it was only a matter of time before his poor body turned up underneath some shrub with a gunshot wound to his head. She'd known that boy, since their little family found a home in Cotswold way back when. Back then he'd been a much too hyper little raga-muffin and now, he was a much too hyper and much bigger raga-muffin. He sure as hell didn't deserve to die!

Darting across her freshly mowed lawn—all thanks to her lovely husband Dusty—Thirty-nine-year-old Alice galloped onto old man Rogers's yard. Much like her, he wasn't confined within the walls of his home. No one in the neighbourhood seemed to be. Four police cars and a neon yellow do-not-cross-banner would do that to a neighbourhood, especially one with a history of murdered ten-year-old boys. His sharp, long, vulture like neck snapped on her direction and he barked a groan. "It's the Daniels boy, Alice; they've gottem', the poor thing."

"I've been watching the police for a while. They sure as hell don't seem to be doing anything to find him." Old man Rogers huffed.

"It's just like 'em. That's exactly how they let Oliver Westons' case slip beneath their skirts."

"Heard it was reported from some store in Providence." She glanced at the Daniels yard as one by one, officers streamed in and out.

"How'd yer hear that?"

"Dusty knows a guy in uniform." She returned her attention to the lean old man, right at the material time his bimbo

wife, Bailey had materialized. With an antiquated mindset, and a head set in stone, Alice would be the last person to be in support of this here father-daughter-like marriage. The city girl he'd tugged from New York was old enough to be her damn daughter! Not that Alice would wear her disgust outright. "But that's beside the point, we've gotta' round up the neighbourhood, Roger. Too many kids have been taken from Cotswold. At least one of them deserves to return home."

"Where in heavens' name er'we gonna search first? I can round up folks from Hartness Avenue mind getting Bertonley Avenue?" Alice nodded. The night was only getting darker, the evening, all the more brisk. There was a storm coming, but she liked to believe it had little to do with the weather.

"Get everyone to my house, we'll set off from there. We're gonna' spread out in twos and take everywhere up to Providence and if it gets too late we circle back, refuel and set off in the morning."

"We've gotta' do our part this time." Rogers mumbled.

"That we do."

Chapter Four

Madison Miller didn't have much of a choice in the matter. Irrespective of her stance at a cross-road, wedged with knowing or not knowing the the next move of the deranged killer, the decision had been made for her. She hadn't had time to collect her thoughts, to form a lucid reaction to Adam Walker's claims. Maybe if she had, she would have drenched him in questions. One by one her concern would pelt his seemingly tough skin. She wasn't given that luxury. Her phone had blared in her hand, it was loud, startling her to the point she'd nearly tossed the vibrating device onto the floor. Her mind, as empty as a meadow field and as clustered as protest hadn't entertained the idea of checking the caller I.D. She'd never really had a habit of doing it anyway. She was careless like that at times.

She was encircled in a thick gloomy fog of her own petrification. The voice on the other end of the line was foreign to her, it pierced her ears with a sinister wail, and then an eerie pause, she heard a cough, the wailing piped up again. "I'm sorry," The voice begged. It was a male voice. He sounded old, not too old, in his late twenties, early thirties. It had been cloaked with regret, guilt. Madison Miller had an inkling on who was on the other end of the line, she needed to keep him on long enough, just enough to trace the call. She guzzled a breath, closed up, and she let her brain stutter, just a bit before it caught up. "I-I didn't mean to take him." Her teeth clenched, she could feel it, they were grinding against each other. It was him, he was responsible for Ethan's kidnap, did that mean he was responsible for the kidnap and murder of the ten ten-year-old boys? Would he confess while he was on the line with her? If he did would law enforcement be able to retrieve his confession? She

highly doubted it, her phone hadn't been bugged. No one was listening besides her because she was entertaining a call out of the left field. She felt trapped, in the shadows, alone.

"You have him?" She was sure to drop her voice to a whisper. She wasn't going to scare him off. Not until he'd talked for at least two minutes. She wasn't sure the amount of time before a call could be traced, but she had a rough sketch of an idea. "How is he?" She pulled her bottom lip between her teeth. She could feel it, like she couldn't remember how to breathe.

"I-I didn't mean to take him... I don't know why I'm like this." The man sniffled, she heard shuffling, it sounded hollow. It could have been the cell-service. She pressed her phone closer to her ear, she would have to give a statement, she needed to know what she was hearing. Did her neighbors suspect her jittery behavior? Would she be questioned as a suspect when she was a witness in the kidnapping?

"Is he okay?" She asked again. She kept her tone calm, reassuring. She couldn't afford aggravating him, not when she had little an idea where he'd taken Ethan or if the ten-year-old boy would be found as the next victim of this deranged man. Madison hoped it didn't come to that. She waited, she would be patient if she had to, a boy's life was on the line. She would do whatever she had to. Her hands felt dead cold, they trembled. Couldn't this man, the one on the line get that she couldn't live through another child kidnapping? Through the death of another innocent child?

"I...don't want to kill him. I wanted to kill the others... not him." He coughed, cleared his throat. Madison had questions, they whipped and zoomed her thoughts. She wondered just how he'd come across her number? Why was he contacting her specifically and not 9-1-1? It didn't add up, nothing did at this point.

"Are you going to kill him?" He didn't want to, it meant Ethan was still alive, presumably bruised, but Madison hoped it wasn't more than that. To her question, he released another cry, she heard footsteps, he was pacing. Her eyes broadened. "You don't have to answer that." She didn't need to push him she needed to talk to, to really talk to him. "What do you want in exchange for the boy?" From the corner of her eye, she'd seen the tension in Adam Walker's stance, he was listening, she wasn't alone, he was listening. "I... I don't want nothing. I don't even want to hurt him..." Madison pulled the phone from her ear, he was still on the line, she placed it back. "I have to go." She couldn't object, she couldn't cause a scene. She nodded, the line was long dead. Adam turned, his eyes asked the questions, she nodded. It was him, their killer.

*

Adam Walker had a plan, one he would need Madison Miller's full undeterred corporation to execute. They would bring back Ethan Daniels and if all went according to his plan, the boy would be returned without even a scratch. He let his eyes return to Todd, the rookie who couldn't just seem to get a search crew on base in time. Why had Alexander Hemmings called Madison? Could he have pegged the wrong guy for the murder? No, his gut hardly threw him a curve ball, this was his guy and from the ghostly paleness in Madison's skin, that hadn't been her chatter-box of a mother checking in. From what he'd seen on multiple walks around the neighbourhood, Julia Miller breezed with a Julia Roberts air; she demanded to be noticed, to be heard, and despite her authority, she was the last person to instil fear in Madison. This wasn't Madison's mother. No, it was the workings of Alexander Hemmings and Adam could hit a

home-run guessing he'd called begging for forgiveness. But Why Madison? He'd always called 9-1-1 until now.

In the far end, pulling into the drive-way was the Daniels. Lauren hadn't waited for her husband to pull to a complete stop, in her eyes were devastation, sadness, and beyond that, was fear. Her stride was calculated, purposeful; she was coming for Madison. Adam Walker's reflexes were slow, they'd only kicked in after the first slap had been struck along Madison's cheek, the whisky brown haired beauty brought a hand to her cheek. She held her tongue. Adam pushed between the two women. He could only imagine what Lauren felt, he couldn't blame her actions, but even still, he wasn't going to condone violence. Not now when everyone needed to work together to bring this boy back. Todd walked up and behind him, with a stomach that threatened to pop the sixth button on his shirt was Officer Jenkins. "Mrs. Daniels I presume?" Todd reached out a hand to shake the frantic mother. She wrapped her arms around her trembling form ignoring the officer's outstretched hand. "We would just like to ask you some routine questions, if you can come with me?" With eyes that still trailed Madison, she walked along with Todd, Jenkins lingered.

"Miss Miller, can you run me through what happened again?" Adam frowned, would Madison pour her guts about the call? No, if she did Ethan was as good as dead. Alexander Hemmings was a grenade without the pin, moments from exploding and he didn't care who he took down with him. He looked at her, could she read his eyes? If she could, he hoped her statement wouldn't involve her call with Alex.

"I already told you, I sent him off to his room to finish up on his homework. I stayed by the dining room and that's when I heard it... the crashing sound of glass shattering, I bolted to his room, there was nothing, so I searched the house, and

there was another crash, it was his bedroom window this time, he was gone."

"And where were you after you placed your 9-1-1 call?" Jenkins sounded as if he was one doughnut away from a heart attack, man the force had really let their personnel go. "Because we have multiple witnesses placing you at Hartness Avenue when protocol requests you remain calm within the vicinity of the attack for police intervention." Adam didn't like where this conversation was heading, he was going to detain her as a suspect, she was a witness, a key one that may be material to the retrieval of Ethan Daniels.

"Are you insinuating this innocent witness could have orchestrated the kidnapping?" Adam pried, Jenkins glared.

"I am not insinuating anything, I'm merely questioning her decision to organize a search of her own, a decision that could have cost the young boy his safety." Jenkins shoved away his notepad. "And sir, I would have to ask that you stay out of my interrogation, this is a police operation."

"That house was empty when she left," Jenkins rose an eyebrow as if asking, how Adam knew this. "She left me behind, I conducted a thorough search of that house in her absence, he'd been taken." He was merely swinging for the fences, he knew there would be consequences, he would face them when the time came.

"We will need to take you both down to the station to give official accounts of this," He looked to Madison; she was terrified if he'd ever seen it in a woman. She needed to be strong, to keep her lips, those thin arched lips of hers shut for him... For Ethan too, but damn if hadn't entertained one too many naughty thoughts about those lips.

Chapter Five

Adam Walker had been pacing the curb outside Westover Precinct, his phone clutched tight in grip by the time Madison made it through the translucent doors. Perched on the steps, she'd looked down at him, underneath the night freckled with stars. He hadn't exactly seen Officer Hopkins, but he'd scheduled a meet with him, and in Adam's book, that was some sort of win. By brunch, he would take the grey-haired officer out for some darts and a good time, and when he was up to his neck in good beers and hookers, he would put in a good word to the sheriff. And if that didn't work... well, Adam didn't want it to get to that.

Things had changed, Hemmings had switched to chess, and he was still playing checkers. He needed to switch, to change up his plans; he needed access to a team of responding officers... but first, he needed to check in on the woman who'd been hauled into the centre of a serial-child murder case.

The bitter-sweet smell of a pending storm had his stomach churning. He'd given a statement, she had as well, but what exactly had she confided in the authorities? Did she mention the call? One by one, eyes of spring trailed her steps, *Pat! Pat! Pat!* until she was next to him. Close enough that he could reach out and run an endearing finger over her smooth cheeks, cupping the slightly reddened aftermath of Lauren Daniel's panic. The breeze in its boldness whisked his skin, arousing wakefulness, an alertness. "Ethan Daniel's life is on the line, Madison." His soft whisper kissed her cheeks. "What did you tell those officers in there?" Her eyes squeezed shut, his heart dropped; it was almost like he'd felt it plummet. His hands dropped to his sides. "Goddamn it

woman!" He was drawing unnecessary attention from curious pedestrians. "What exactly did you tell them?"

"First of all don't raise your voice at me." She said menacingly. "And secondly, they are going to trace the call; they are going to keep me informed."

"Alexander Hemmings doesn't use his phone to report his victims." She didn't seem convinced. Not in the slightest.

"And how do you know this?" She crossed her hands over her chest defiantly.

"We can spend a whole day talking about how I know what I do, but that doesn't change the fact that Ethan needs your help. The police are at a dead-end that call could give us a sense of direction, but it's not going to change any... Did they bug your phone?" He yanked it from her grip.

"Hey! I reported a call and gave them the number that called; I was with my phone the whole time." She tugged her phone back.

"I'm sorry. I just don't want anything to happen to any other kid when we can do something, when we can play our cards right." He ran a hand through his hair. He turned away from her and towards the street. He flagged down a cab.

"Why exactly do you feel this Alexander Hemmings person is behind all of this?" She asked softly. He didn't acknowledge her presence next to him, but he acknowledged her question. A yellow cab breezed past overlooking his frantic waving.

"I had a bucket of suspects when these murders started happening, by the eighth victim, I knew exactly who I was dealing with; Alexander Hemmings, a multiple offender, always being hauled back to the station for one thing or the other. After a stake-out put him at the scene of the 8th victims' kidnapping, I knew he was the guy. Trailing him

through town put me at a payphone by Dogget Street South End. I put two and two together, got in touch with the detective in charge, and everything adds up.” He took a step back when a whirling yellow cab slowed into the curb.

“Why couldn’t you arrest him there and then when you’d placed him at the scene of the 8th victims kidnapping?” He pulled open the door for her.

“There wasn’t exactly much I could do; I don’t exactly have my badge.” She slipped into the cab, he followed closely behind. “And besides, as at then, all I had were speculations, the detective in charge just confirmed everything this morning.”

“You could report it.” He tilted his head.

“Yeah, I could, but I would also need to be very sure of who I’m accusing. If I step forward to the authorities without adequate proof, I would be investigated as a primary suspect, and my reputation with the authorities has already taken a belly dive into an empty pool.” He leaned forward and to the cab driver said; “Bertonley avenue, house 215.”

“So you’ve just being waiting around since the 8th victim because you were worried you had the wrong guy? You are aware two more boys have died since you kept your arms folded. And it’s about to be three.” Her fingers bit into the soft flesh of her palms. “Look, you could either go to the police about this or I will.” He shook his head.

“From experience, Madison, how effective have the police been? Don’t tell me you’ve already forgotten Tucker Miller’s case.” She lunged at him, he held her in place. “I didn’t bring his case up to spite you, just listen.” He released her wrists. “Going to the police will get you so far, and if I might add, we are working with a calculating nutcase; one that has your contact and probably knows where you live. We are

going to have to dance to his tune, just until we can execute our plan.” She adjusted herself in her seat.

“And what exactly is our plan?” Adam smiled to himself.

“We’re going to kill that rat bastard.”

. . .

“And how does that make us any better than he is?” Madison asked again trailing behind him into his home. She’d been there once or twice. She had been there for the funeral reception of Sarah Walker’s death. And the other time... well she didn’t quite like her memory of the other time she’d stumbled into his home. It seemed unchanged, although since the funeral reception, it seemed to whistle with a brisk hollowness. It smelled faintly of roses, and hugged her with a chill. On the summer green walls held paintings and pictures, they didn’t necessarily bring Sarah back to life, but they came close, capturing her parade smile and easy grace in a frame.

“We aren’t going to kill him, the police are. We are just going to push him to the corner, till he has nowhere to run.” He continued forward, till his fingers clutched the cool handle of the fridge. He pulled it open. “Want anything, some beer, cheer wine, water?” He looked further in the back. “There’s an old can of soda here too.”

She thought for a second. “I’ll have a water.” Her words travelled the room as her hands trailed over the frames of the pictures that lined his walls. “And here I thought you were anti-police.”

“Partially, I still want to get back on the force, I can’t be anti-police then.” He emerged from the kitchen and tossed her a plastic bottle of water. She caught it. “Look, I have a plan, you might not like it but I still gotta’ pitch it.”

She was shaking her head. "If I am not going to like it, then dump it, because there is no way in hell I would go through with it." She twisted the nozzle of the bottle and guzzled the contents hungrily.

"Look at it this way. Alexander Hemmings, our killer called you, which means he was in the vicinity long enough to get your details from the Daniels home." She swallowed the lump in her throat. "He's going to keep in touch with you, at least before he does something to Ethan, and I need you to get close to him, close enough to get a confession out of him, close enough to get Ethan from him." Nope, she wasn't going to play ball. What if she messed up and got Ethan killed? This is a situation she needed to rely on the authorities for. They'd taken her statement; didn't that mean they were onto something?

"I am not going to get involved, that's the job of the police." He gave her a look as if reminding her about their discussion in the back of the cab. She remained defiant. "I am not getting anymore involved than I already am."

"Should I remind you that you owe this little ten-year-old this, he was in your custody when he was taken; he is going to be scared, sad and desperate. He needs you, are you really going to bail on him?" She turned away, padding to the couch.

"I'm not bailing; I'm letting the law handle it." He was pricking at her conscience.

"The law is shit if you haven't noticed." She had, but how much had her involvement in Tucker Miller's case actually impacted the investigation? It had done nothing but throw officials off track. "Ten boys have died because the law is wedged with no new clues."

"How do you know this is going to work?" Her voice was small, weak, it sent tendrils of irritation surging her veins.

"I don't but we can't let Ethan become the eleventh victim because we didn't try."

*

He could hear it, his heart thundering, threatening to break out of his rib-cage, threatening to break his cover. Alexander Hemmings was a nervous wreck, and just when he'd thought he was going to chicken out, all the reasons to do this came flooding back in. He'd wreaked fear through the streets of Charlotte. Parents trembled for their ten-year-old boys, and children were told stories about the faceless man who would snatch ten-year-olds from their school; although he'd taken things too far with the kidnap of Ethan Daniels. He'd made a bad decision; and now, he needed to know just how much damage he'd caused.

His fingers curled around the cleaning-supplies-buggy, he pushed further, eyes, dark as sin darted to the last door on the left. With the night lurking beyond the walls and windows, the big names that could have booted him for all the children, for Ethan, had taken their leave. He was alone, in a sense; striding farther and farther away from the dull chatter of rookie parole officers. The buggy he trudged squeaked, his footsteps thumped a beat.

Hemmings stopped, turned the knob into detective Gates office. It was locked, that wasn't going to stop him, if there was anything mama Hemmings always said is; "Don't let a locked door stop you sweetie, if you really wanna get in, there's always another way." Although Alex doubted she'd meant it in the sense of breaking and entering... She was dead anyway she couldn't exactly scold him now could she? The poor old folk. He reached through the pockets of his overalls for the master key he'd been given upon employment. He'd taken up the job as head janitor of Westover Division's precinct to fill his pockets, if any of the

other guys knew he was sneaking around he'll be waist deep in shit, that was for sure. So he couldn't get caught.

At the soft clicks of footsteps turning the corner, Alex halted, breath held, he listened.

A sweat ran down the side of his chiseled face as a voice said; "Yeah, she just gave her statement, apparently, the killer called her. What was her name, Madison something, she gave us a number. Had Danny down from the phone-company run the digits, get this; the call was made from a payphone somewhere around Cotswold elementary."

That little bitch ratted him out the second he'd cut the damn call! She was supposed to beg for the stupid kid... Ethan... He didn't want to have to hurt him... Well... one more death wouldn't exactly hurt him ...How would she like taking the fall for the little rats' death?

"Think he could still be in the area?" Asked the other voice; easily tugging Hemmings from his spiralling thoughts. He didn't have time for their conversation, and he had a feeling just standing there like a creep was going to draw more attention to himself than he needed. He continued to pat down his overalls for the damn master key he'd never had to use.

Tucked away in his right breast pocket was the master key. He swiped it over the lock. These new fancy technology doohickeys work pretty fast, Alex thought pushing into detective Ryan Gate's office. The room was smaller than Alex had anticipated, and quite messy, but that wasn't his concern, at least not at the moment. On the table were scattered documents, he couldn't tamper, but he could look. So he did, leaned over the edge, he let his eyes roam the headings; Tyler Shaw, Jasper Kepper, Gibson Knight, these were profiles of the victims, his victims. A small smile ghosted his lips, was this pride? It had to be. Because he'd done this, he couldn't explain his reasons, he was sure no

one in the tri-state would understand, but he was responsible and a part of him wanted to scream it from the rooftop.

He didn't need to look too far for what he'd been snooping around for. Pictures, notes and strings, it was a crime board, Gates was trying to narrow down his suspects, he had the staff of Cotswold Elementary pinned as suspects... This was almost too amusing to miss. Even the parents of some of the victims had a mens rea. He shook the table, but none of the glasses toppled over; but how much longer till a glass tips over? How much longer till his luck runs out? He reached for his phone. He would further analyse this, what Gates had gathered, but right now, he couldn't be caught poking his nose where it didn't belong. At the click of his phone camera, there was a knock at the door. Startled, he turned, eyes wide. Shit, Gates wasn't supposed to come back!

Chapter Six

A thrilling silence ran through Adam Walker's home. There was too much to say, and nothing to say. The soft pat of Madison Miller's bare footsteps kissing the parquet was melodious to his droopy eyes and weary mind. "What exactly do I have to do?" She finally asked. He looked up at her, even clothed in the baggiest pair of pyjama pants and top, she radiated an alluring grace, a subtle sexiness. It wasn't much of a secret that he'd admired his neighbour in ways he ought not. And with the ache of Sarah's passing, he'd wanted nothing more than to roll around in the sheets tangled up with the fierce whiskey blonde haired woman next door. In time he'd learned his feelings weren't mutual, at least he had after a drunken night brought her back to his place and she'd lived to regret that mistaken kiss they'd shared by his porch. "Penny for your thoughts, Adam?"

He cleared his throat. "I just wish I knew what game he was playing." Her eyebrows creased in a disheartened frown. By this time yesterday, she'd been checking her email for a response from any of the news stations she'd sent out her résumé to. WCNC, WSOC, Fox46, she was supposed to become the lead reporter, she was supposed to follow the story and tell it from a third person perspective. She had become the story and it was her perspective. She didn't need to switch on the television to know just how her life had been snowed-in. She was in deep shit, at best, she would face legal charges for the tort of negligence. She couldn't escape this without jail time and from the look in Lauren Daniels eyes, it seemed the distraught mother was going to buckle up with the best lawyer money could buy and haul Madison's sorry ass to prison. The thought sent a

chill running down Madison's spine. Prison would not suit her in the slightest.

"Run me over what I have to do to get Ethan back home, preferably unharmed." She cushioned her touchy against the coffee table. Everything she felt, her situation, her emotions were a rerun of what she'd endured after Tucker Miller's kidnap. What had ached her had been the fact that she'd been with him every day and every night for ten-years and just like that, he was snatched away from her. She tucked away the thoughts of him. One day that closet door that concealed her thoughts and fears would burst open and she would have to face everything she'd tossed inside. But that wasn't happening anytime soon, the door still closed, with a bit of an effort, but it still closed. Adam Walker looked up at her.

"The ball isn't in our court, it's in his. We have to wait for his call, and when he does call, you organize a meet-up over coffee, you tell him that you're willing to do whatever it takes, and you negotiate a price to release Ethan. I might be able to get him immunity for the murders, but he has to at least go down for kidnapping."

"That's not even a fair deal!" She grumbled. "Immunity for the murders of ten little boys?" She could imagine what those parents were feeling. Correction, she didn't need to imagine, because she knew just what it felt like to lose a ten-year-old son. She knew what it felt like to lose Tucker Miller. She knew the depression that shadowed her actions; she knew the pain that just never seemed to heal. Those parents might never get over it, but they could get closure knowing the man responsible was paying for his actions. "You can get him a lesser sentence at best but he has to go down for every damn drop of innocent blood those boys shed."

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It wasn't detective Ryan Gates, but both of the rookie parole officers from the hallway. They'd stumbled into the detectives' office. The first one with ragged brown hair and an untucked uniform shirt cleared his throat. His name tag read Hassan, Alex took a swing guessing the man was probably of a middle-eastern decent. Although there wasn't much of an accent to base his guess on. If anything the mans slur was all southern. "Mind if you can clean our office too when you're done here? We had one too many beers to celebrate my buddy's engagement," He hooked an arm around the other officer, the one whose name tag read Felix. "We can't have that getting out to the other guys." Felix chuckled. Alex forced a smile and hoped that these men were three sheets to the wind and wouldn't notice his smile was more of a grimace.

"Sure thing boss, what office?" Alex tugged on his cleaning buggy. He needed to hightail his guilty ass out of Gates office before he finds himself in deeper crap. They may not be able to pin him for the murder of the ten ten-year-old boys, but they could boot him for spying, treason. How many years was that anyway? Did it even matter? Alex wasn't going to go down, not for anything. He'd merely done what the voice in his head urged him to. One ten-year-old for each ten-year-old that tormented him back in elementary school. He remembered them vividly, loud, rambunctious little brats. They'd made it their goal to make his stay at Cotswold a living hell. He'd tried stalking them through the years, it didn't make sense, it was almost like they'd fallen off the face of the earth after graduation into middle-school. They were gone, but he still had this... fire in his belly that burned for revenge. So, he returned to Cotswold elementary, everyday at the same time the harassment would start, and he would sit, hauled back to those afternoons of eating dirt and washing it down with a toilet water, and afterwards, he

would leave. Some times, he would stay around the area, and pick up a kid one who reminded him so much of those boys; Ricky, Ernie, Bert, Chandler, Mikey, Leonard, Gilbert, Kenny, Patrick and Jimmy.

He'd bagged ten boys, but he'd gone too far with Ethan, it was a mistake. He'd got his wires crossed. Ethan was him, in a sense, Ethan was being bullied by the boys Alex had killed, Ethan wore a smile in front of his mother even though he was hurting. He'd just wanted to talk to Ethan, he couldn't wait, it was a late night visit gone wrong and when he'd realized just what he'd done, he had to take the boy. No, he wouldn't kill him, even if that bitch tattled, he would give him back, he just needed to put some things in place.

"317, third floor, we want that place spotless by tomorrow, got it?" Felix's chatter-box friend leaned in, a hand pocked on Alex's chest. Alex nodded. He would have let out a breath if he'd bothered holding one when the men turned and dragged their drunk bodies out of Gates office. Alex had seen enough, he would go home and further analyse just how these suspects could lead the police back to... well... him.

Chapter Seven

Soft flecks of grey-gold dawn lights seeped through the gap in the drapes. The pitter-patter of a drizzle was eminent through the thin sheets of glass over the bed, it was a mere reminder of the storm that ravaged the night. Madison Miller hadn't been able to get a lick of sleep, at least not in her own home; she'd tossed and turned all the while wondering whether the faceless killer would come after her. He knew her phone number who's to say he didn't know her address as well? He'd probably already found out about her statement and had been watching her through her own window. The fear that gripped her at the mere thought sat quietly, watching as her breathing became erratic, deep, and then shallow. At that point, she'd sat with reason and drawn the conclusion that if she were to sleep, she would be riddled with vivid daunting nightmares.

Rolling out of bed, Madison reached for her phone and twirled her car keys on her lean trembling fingers. She didn't think she would need to depend on that heap of scrap metal she'd paid for in her early twenties... but then again, she couldn't take any risks—that is to say letting anyone bolt away with her clunky 2009-model Nissan 350z. As she drifted through her home a mere silhouette in night, she'd picked up mere necessities, like the old flip knife her late aunt Denise had shoved at the very back of the coffee table drawer. Thoughts of her late aunt Denise cradled her. Back when she would make visits to Charlotte, bounding along with Julia Miller, Denise Weinstein would always open these very doors for her sister and accompanying niece; Madison. It was no wonder why after the grey-woman's tragic demise; Madison had sought the open doors of house 216, Bertonley Avenue—where her withering Aunt had managed to

exquisitely meet antique Queen-Anne furnishings with a modern hue of warm grey walls. Madison Miller only wished she hadn't inherited the throat slitting mortgage along with her new home.

At least from what a young Madison could tell at the time, the lease seemed to be the peak of Denise's inconveniences. She highly doubted the poor old woman had to deal with a serial killer gawking outside her window, threatening to take the life of a ten-year-old boy.

There had been a tender breeze that rippled through Madison's baggy pyjama shirt when she'd slipped out onto her porch. The night had been pitch black, there hadn't been a black out, but none of the street lamps glared over the isolated streets. Her head darted towards the bushes, the fern shrubs that separated her property from that of Adam Walkers'. She'd heard it again, the rustling that caught her attention. It had to be that dang cat that always seemed to gait its way onto her porch for a square meal... what else could it be?

The night grumbled with an ache, one that had Madison quickly locking her front door and scurrying to Adam's. She'd read enough books and watched enough movies to feel threatened, vulnerable, pounding against the door of her neighbour at ungodly hours of the morning.

"Has he called?" Adam had asked, flinging his front door ajar, just enough to let her in as well as flakes of the nights' bracing gust. She scampered into his home, breezing towards the couch. She heard the large wooden door click behind her.

"Not exactly, but, I don't think after my statement, I should be... alone. Like you pointed out, he might know more than just my phone number." He might want to slowly torture her for ratting him out to the police. How stupid could she be? This was reality; the police could only do so much. The

couch dipped and crinkled with Adam Walker's weight, she didn't look at him. She'd let her eyes rest aimlessly on the stack of ripped envelopes slumped over his coffee table.

"You think he's killed him?" He defiled the silence. She shook her head, letting the question whistle through the room. "How long does he keep his victims before they're... killed?" Adam asked, his only response, a shrug from Madison's quaking shoulders. "I tried reaching out to a friend of mine in forensics; there wasn't much he could disclose about the bodies without breaching his contract with the precinct."

"He's not dead." Madison sat up straighter, her teeth clenched. There was a hollow emptiness that whisked through Adam's home. Almost like there had been life long forgotten. The bright summer green walls wailed, the homey browns of the parquet welcomed and yet his home breezed with an empty cry. "Can we just not, jinx Ethan's case?" Adam heaved a sigh.

"You want to tell me what happened with Tucker Miller's case instead?" She could hear it, her teeth grinding against each other. She swallowed a lump. Since the funeral, she hadn't spoken much about the passing of her son, she'd thought about him, but she'd always shied away from the wave of hysteria that sat heavy on her chest at just the mere thought of him.

A soft cold cackle slipped into his living room, it was Madison's, and it was careened with unease. "There's nothing to tell." The couch dipped further, he'd turned to her. In her chest, her heart threatened to burst from her ribs; *if it beat too fast would it just stop?* She'd entertained the meandering thought. Her lips parted, her words eluded her. She clamped her lips shut and let her eyes travel to his; they were a spring green that waited.

“Tucker loved hide and seek.” She pushed through her lips, ignoring the chill that scooped her chest and the subtle whispers in her ears that she had been a bad mother, a failed mother. “We would always play and he would always win. One day, he’d insisted on playing and I’d insisted on working that night... Now that I think about it, I don’t even remember what I had been working on that seemed so important at the time. He’d grumbled but he’d gone to his room and hours later there’d been a break-in, Adam...”

“He’d been taken.” Adam finished for her. “And you called the police, and they hadn’t done anything.” Adam paused. He frowned. “What about Clive, your husb...Ex-husband, where had he been through all this?”

Madison thought for a second. “Clive had been on a business trip to Mississippi. He’d returned shortly after the burial.” She’d missed him, his soothing words, and his warm embrace. She’d never been the kind of wife to hold back her man. He had a career of his own to build; she’d held her own pretty well without him before, she could always do it again. She had.

“And Tucker didn’t belong to Clive?” Adam asked. “I say that because, well... you had him with you when you moved in next door at eighteen.” She nodded.

“I got pregnant for Tucker after a drunken night at my junior prom. Lordie knows Julia wasn’t too pleased with me showing up to all our family cook-outs sporting a bump, but I would have rather had my arms chopped off than to lose Tucker.” She still lost him.

“I’m just throwing this out there, but do you sincerely think Clive was all too happy with you bringing a kid into your marriage?” She sprung to her feet.

“You think Clive killed Tucker?”

. . .

The rain poured heavy from the dark clouds sprawled across the skies. They'd billowed in from the west, the downpour tilted ever so slightly, almost at an angle to purposely slap against the windows and doors. If this were any other night, Adam Walker would have lavished in the music of the storm, a beat to his thunderous thoughts. This wasn't any other night. For one, the whiskey haired beauty he'd had his eyes on for one too many years was in his home, and with her easily accompanied the soft floral fragrance that he'd grown with time to liken to her.

He hadn't bothered with a response, but let the quickly ceasing night respond for him. "You think Clive killed Tucker?" Madison Miller asked again, the soft pat-pat of her feet against the parquet, but a whisper in the storm. Her words weren't as loud as before, she'd toned it down. She seemed whirled in a gale of her own thoughts. On his feet, Adam drifted to the dresser by the entrance. "Well...It would explain his sudden disappearance..." She turned to him, to Adam by his front door. She seemed pale white, almost as if she'd seen a ghost. He'd done this to her, his words, what they implied. "No! This can't be... no. He wouldn't kill my son. Why would he?" His steps were slow, hesitant, her eyes had trailed his form, just until he was next to her, in his beefy hands, a body of documents he'd accumulated with time. He peered at her. Many nights he'd wondered just how he would shed more light on Tucker Miller's case; she hadn't exactly reached out to the former detective that lived next door. Thinking about it now, he ought to have reached out to her.

"I looked into the officers who'd investigated Tucker's case," He handed her the file. It was heavy, at least to her. It would explain the sudden distress that clouded her eyes, and the

one woman struggle to keep the papers from scattering onto the floor. "They'd all been relieved of their duties on the force with no particular reason. I found this odd and asked around...did some digging; they were bribed by a man under the alias Patrick Hunter." Her eyes glimmered, her brows dipped. He had a bad feeling the name was all too familiar.

"That was his father's name." She dropped back into the couch, its soft cushions crinkling. "Clive always talked about his father who, albeit was never there. He always answered to his mother's last name, Green." She flipped through the papers and documents Adam had compiled. "Clive Patrick Green." She whispered almost calling out to him.

"Further diggings lead me to the kidnappers accosted for the crime; Bert Lance and Ricky Fisher, employees of the WCCB." He'd seen it, the single tear christening her cheek. He wished he hadn't.

"But... why didn't you arrest him when you learned all this?" Her heavy breathing laced her words.

"It's beyond police jurisdiction if the case has been deemed cold. The ball was never in my court, Madison, but it's in yours. You can still do something for Tucker. It's late, but it's never too late." She nibbled on her bottom lip. He was doing this for a reason, he was helping her. Why then did each escaping tear from those sapphire blue eyes hurt him?

Maybe it had a little to do with the fact that the whiskey blonde haired woman next door was beginning to cloud a lot more than just his thoughts.

*

Clive Greene wasn't picking his calls. Madison Miller had already spent the better half of her morning ringing his line.

She'd left more than enough voicemails; she'd said nothing of her bothersome discussion with Adam. But at the very least, she needed to see him. Was he purposely busying her calls? Should she pay him a visit? Was he even in the state? He had to be, they'd spoken but a month ago when he'd resolved her rent dilemma. Was he ignoring her because he was of the belief that she needed more money? If she had enough to sustain herself and her rent, she wouldn't have to give him such an impression. In her defence, she'd received more of the furniture and useless toys from the divorce; he'd walked away with a larger share of the alimony. He'd saddled up with the best divorce attorney Charlotte had and she? She'd had to endure a state provided public attorney who'd clearly been handling three other divorce cases within the time line of hers.

It hasn't stopped; the gentle tapping of raindrops against the window. The drizzle hadn't let up in the slightest. She wouldn't go after her ex-husband, but sitting around waiting for a call from a serial lunatic didn't seem like much of an option either. No, she needed to do something with her time; something with the words that had thumped against her skull, something until she'd received instructions on what to do about Ethan's case. It was there about 9:15 A.M., much too early to catch a lawyer, but not too early to join a search party. She hadn't heard much from the detective in charge after she'd been hauled down to the station for questioning, but she'd listened in and picked up just enough to know there would be a search party gathered outside Cortland Cotswold with detective Ryan Gates, officers Todd Wilde, Gerald Hopkins, Peter Jenkins and the Mecklenburg County Sheriff, Chad Griffin as well as the residents of Bertonley and Hartness Avenue. So Madison Miller needed to get her hind end going while the going was good.

The parquet was dead-cold almost like the chill of marble on a crisp winter morning. She lunged for her shoes; mere flip

flops kicked half-hazard beneath the bed. Adam Walker's apartment was ghost-quiet, save for her presence. Had he stepped out for a jog? He ought to have returned... shouldn't he? Through the bedroom door, her eyes danced across the room, sweeping the living room and dining area for the man she'd lived next to since she'd moved in at eighteen. Clearly, something was wrong, why else wouldn't he be in his own home? Unless he'd received a visitor, one he didn't quite feel comfortable with her meeting. Had Alexander Hemmings dropped by? Were they outside negotiating Ethan Daniels' freedom? And why did the thought cripple her?

Pat, pat... Pat, pat... Pat, pat, her footsteps pealed gently, slowly against the floor. She stopped by the window, the one gawking out onto Adam Walker's lawn. Madison Miller's legs were noodles, her throat clogged with a scream. Adam Walker was by the porch, he wasn't alone. Was that Hemmings? He hadn't given her a description of Alexander Hemmings, but from what she'd heard from his sorrow woven call, she imagined he was a stout small man with eyes of death and skin of bleach; he would reek of cheap cologne and cigarettes, and would have on a clearly over worn wife beater and washed jeans. That looked nothing like the man occupying Adam's attention. Whatever the case, she couldn't linger idle as a broken clock. If it was him, the alleged serial child killer, he would turn his attention to her. After all, he'd called her that night and not Adam Walker.

Pat, her heart thumped in pace of her steps. Pat, thump, pat, thump, pat... her fingers curled around the door knob. If it was him, he would talk to her directly. If it was him, he would give her instructions, a ransom... He would turn to her with a wicked grin and those eyes sunken and sleep deprived as they were would run up and down her slender form, and at that moment she would feel more than positive that her

noodle legs would cave and she would drop to her knees, hurling out everything she'd consumed the previous day.

The soft scent of wet grass dallied through her nostrils, the pitter-patter of a drizzle was a melody off tempo with the slowed beat of her heart. She recognized the man by rails, the man she'd expected would be gathered at Cortland Cotswold. Detective Ryan Gates didn't bother with her presence, almost expecting her to breeze past him and into the snappy morning shower. She lingered. He turned to her, frustrated to say the least. "And how might I help you... Miss...?"

"Miller. Madison Miller." She supplied.

"Well, Miss. Miller, if you don't mind, I am in the middle of a conversation I would rather stay between Mr. Walker and me." Gates bit, urging her to scurry along. The beefy man proceeded to shoving his hands into his pants pockets. To Madison, Gates resembled a Southern style Claes Bang. Her eyes climbed to Adam next to her who seemed internally troubled.

"Hmm... I wonder if the Sheriff knows you're flaking off an official search party for a conversation." Madison made herself comfortable. Whatever they were sharing, they could do so with her around. Whether she liked it or not, she was involved in this case, and the sooner everyone digested that fact the easier things would flow.

"What do you want in particular Miss Miller? Well, besides threatening a federal officer which is a punishable offence." Ryan Gates said. She hadn't made any threats, she had however implied.

"I want to know what is going on, here," She gestured to the gap between them. "... And with Ethan Daniels' case." Both men shared a look, one that left a deep churning feeling in her gut as dread set up camp.

. . .

With a soft dawn creeping up on Cotswold, Alice Sanders could barely believe the turnout at her home. She'd barely slept, too distraught with Ethan's situation. So she'd prepared finger sandwiches in their dozens, she'd hand squeezed lemons into a jar and shoved it into the back of the fridge; all an attempt to pry her stirring mind from wondering just what that poor boy had to be going through. She could only imagine it, what each kid had to go through. And although his case differed from those boys that were taken from their walks home from school, from their bus rides, from Cotswold elementary, there was no bone of doubt in her body that it was the same madman behind Ethan's kidnapping.

"There's a larger gathering over on Cortland Cotswold. Folks are saying it might turn into a press conference for the people of Cotswold." Bailey rattled from the couch. Although the search crew Alice and Roger had gathered over night hadn't turned up the boy or any clues, she'd felt just a little more at peace with herself. She'd tried for the boy, and she wasn't going to stop there. She'd started a movement. She would join a bigger one, and with people flowing through every street, she was positive Ethan would turn up. He had to.

"Really?" Inquired Leah Donovan from Hartness Avenue. "So the police were able to get something together."

"Took them long enough." Old man Rogers sighed.

"What time's that kicking off?" Alice asked.

"Any minute now, I was talking to Roger about it and he's outside talking to the rest of our petty party." Alice clenched her jaw. Not only was this girl a bimbo, she was ignorant too. But that didn't matter, Ethan did.

“We can meet up with them and set off from there.” Alice voiced. “Lord I hope we find the poor child.” She whispered more to herself. She knew she wasn’t the only one affected by the poor child’s disappearance. There were many more that were just as disgruntled, many more that were willing to set aside a night of sleep to bring home the poor Daniels boy.

Chapter Eight

“Since you are already acquainted with Mr. Walker, I suppose there’s nothing to hide?” The Southern Claes Bang pealed his eyes from Madison’s curious sapphire blues. Gates looked in desperate need of a smoke; agitated and glittery. Maybe the warmth from the cigarette could get some colour into his dead cheeks, the ambling thought merely drifted through Adam Walker’s mind. He wore a blank look, eyes of spring greens, muddled. For a moment, a relative silence settled in amidst the dwindling drizzle; the gentle wind, morning kisses on a dazed Adam Walker. A degree of whiplash was expected for his involvement in Ethan Daniels’ case; for the testimony he’d made to his precinct on Madison Miller’s behalf. She hadn’t asked him to have her back, from what he’d known about her, she didn’t need much help, she’d never needed much help. Why then had he gone ahead to play the knight-in-a-not-so-shining-armour? Maybe it had a little something to do with the green feeling in the pit of his stomach; a feeling out of left field, a mere reaction to Officer Jenkins’s ceaseless questions.

Ryan Gates fired on; “It’s no secret your buddy here worked for the CMPD as a homicide detective and my former partner.” Adam Walker hadn’t just worked for the CMPD; he’d been one of the best, relying on his gut and training. But he’d been off base during his last assignment; one that had cost him his badge and reputation. In a sense, he’d learned from his shortcomings, the CMPD was a body built on bureaucracy; they cherished their lengthy procedures. He only wished he didn’t need to be caught at a raid rubbing elbows with Charlotte’s most wanted drug dealer before he’d learned that. “He’s between things right now and needed

my help getting him back on the horse, problem is he has just about totalled all chances of that after being hauled down to the station and questioned as a suspect for Ethan's kidnapping."

The look of anguish that veiled Madison Miller's features lit an inferno in his gut. Twice! His gut had let him down twice! Her feet were rooted in place, her ears opened. As if Gates hadn't already done enough damage, he pressed on. "And as for Ethan's kidnapping, the CMPD is slumped for suspects." There was a glimmer in her eyes. Adam couldn't miss it for the world, and with that glimmer brought the bitter warmth of apprehension.

"What about the call?" Gates leaned against the porch rails. It whined beneath his weight. "Your officers promised they would trace it, that they would get back to me." There was fierceness in her tone, an underlying accusation.

"It was a busted lead from a payphone here at Cotswold, whoever called you, for whatever reason either knew you were going to sell them out and wanted you to do just that, or knows exactly what he's doing and is being extremely careful."

"He's going to call again, the kidnapper, the killer. He's going to give me instructions on how to get Ethan back."

"And you are telling me this because? Aren't you worried he's going to find out your little scheme of working with the police? That he's going to kill the boy in a fit of rage?" At his words, Madison tugged her bottom lip between her teeth. Alexander Hemmings was the puppet master who'd strung the CMPD like ragged dolls. And just as sure as Adam was about his passion for the Durham Bulls, he could bet that the mere thought of the police getting closer to catching him had to be a thrill of some sort.

“And the Daniels home didn’t turn up any new clues? What had the intruder used to shatter the windows? Were there strands of hair or fingerprints left at the scene?” Madison asked streaking a hand through her uncombed hair. Adam didn’t need anyone to point it out; he’d noticed it all on his own. He’d spent more time focusing on Madison than Gates. He’d contacted his former partner, once more to negotiate a way back into uniform that didn’t involve dangling valuable information over the Sheriff. And yet, his eyes of spring had rather trailed his neighbours’ graceful movements, her gentle expressions.

“Look, Miss Miller, I don’t want to lie to you, so I won’t.” Gates straightened. Like the last grains in an hour glass, his patience was wearing thin. He’d probably remembered that the Sheriff wouldn’t be too pleased that one of his detectives was flaking out on a search party. “An overnight search of the premises turned up no weapon of forced entry, as for strands of hair, forensics believes it belonged to Ethan Daniels. Like I said earlier Miss Miller, whoever is behind this is being extremely careful.”

“He’s bound to slip up sometime.” Adam pitched. “Even the greatest minds make mistakes. The question is will we be ready when our killer fucks up?”

. . .

Her anxiety sat below her stomach with her gut. She knew it was anxiety when she could feel more clearly the eyes on her, when she could hear more keenly, the whispers around her. But Parker had convinced her that sitting in front of a camera, broadcasting her pain, her anguish, her helplessness on channel 36; WCNC, maybe, just maybe they could reach into the heart of whoever could have taken their son. Though sitting there, make-up caked, hand in hand with a man that didn’t deserve his only son snatched from him, she didn’t know what to make of things. A part of her, a

great one was found it absurd that a third party could have broken into their home and taken Ethan and nothing else. Sincerely, Madison Miller's claims sat like oil in water to Lauren Daniels.

"Alright we're going live in ten... nine..."

"Ready to get our son back?" Parker whispered, his lips pressed to her ear. She recoiled into her own skin. She hadn't been much for physical contact since returning to their empty home.

"We don't even know if this is going to work?"

"Be positive, please." She nodded.

"Three... two... one..."

"Good Morning Charlotte. Kicking off today's headlines we have with us parents of the latest missing Cotswold kid. Ten-year-old Ethan Daniels much unlike the other kidnapped Cotswold kids had been snatched from his Cotswold home and not from the red-hot elementary school that has been the grounds of multiple kidnaps." Chirped the glimmering reporter. Lauren could care less what her name was. She'd heard it once or twice while having her make-up touched up for the camera; she hadn't bothered to remember it. She'd rather pondered over just how necessary it was that she looked good for the camera? Her son could be killed in a matter of days. What if he'd already been killed? Would her highlights matter then? "And they have quite a lot to say to the public. Including a plea for the return of their baby boy."

This was her cue, she was live and she was tongue tied. She had too much to say, she didn't know where to start. She had too much she'd been feeling, she hadn't been able to control the tears. One by one, they rolled down her cheek, creating streaks and streams down her foundation. Parker squeezed her hands and she nibbled on the inside of her cheeks, she turned to him. *She couldn't do it.* Her eyes said,

dancing beneath a pool of hot painful tears. She hoped he got the message. He did, because he'd nodded and offered her that smile she'd fallen in love with.

"We can't have another boy for so many reasons." Parker started, glaring the second camera—the one they'd been instructed to stare into—dead on. "To begin with, a child is simply irreplaceable. Even if we could make another, in our hearts would be a gaping hole where Ethan was supposed to be. We have a plan for him; our baby boy. We are ready to give him the best, take him to the best schools, to ensure he sits only in the lap of luxury. But we can't do that if he's taken away from us."

"And why can't you make another kid?" Grace Church the head reporter turned to Parker, her features scrunched in distress.

"We're barren, Mrs. Church. Ethan was a medical miracle. We knew he was all we had, and all we could have. And we're not ready to lose him. No parent is ready to lose their baby even if they can have another."

"You have a specific message on behalf of Cotswold parents?"

"We don't want to live in fear. We don't want to sit at the edge of our seats wondering whether or not our kids will make it back from school, or if they would be snatched from their bedrooms. Those kids don't deserve their futures tugged from their feeble grips and we as parents just want to see that they become something worth it in life." He turned to Lauren Daniels who'd sat there, her tears nearly dry, he assumed her heart filled with a glimmering hope and he said; "My wife here is in shambles, I am too. And we think we can speak on behalf of all those parents who'd had to bury their ten-year-old sons. We're broken without our kids, so please, to whoever this message may concern..." Parker paused, a single tear rolling down his cheek. In his chest, he

felt as if his heart had given away. He didn't want to lose Ethan. He didn't want to be one of those parents that buried their kids. No, he had to be different, he didn't know how he would take it if he'd been piled up with the rest, a parent with the body of their ten-year-old son, a body decorated with a bullet hole. "...please, bring back our baby boy!"

"You've heard it here first folks, Cotswold parents are begging for an end to the murder of their ten-year-old boys. After the break, could a nationwide protest spark from the rampant child-kidnapping-trend? This has been Grace Church with the Daniels, here first on channel 36 news."

. . .

There was a screech, ear-piercing; unnerving and yet at a pitch much too familiar to a disgruntled Madison Miller. Why wouldn't it be when the very shriek had been present the day she'd been caught with a positive pregnancy test at sixteen? Much like Adam Walker and detective Ryan Gates, Madison Miller turned to the source of the frantic screaming. Just over the fern shrubs she'd scurried away from in the wake of the night, stood a peeved Julia Miller with hair of deep earthy hues pulled back in a Bella Hadid style ponytail. Standing tall at a grey fifty-two years old, Julia Miller didn't look a day over thirty... Maybe Madison ought to visit her mother's dermatologist, that is if she isn't hauled away to prison for neglect.

If Madison had risen with the delusion that she would relish in the soothing allure of the morning—listen to the harmonious tweet of birds as a cool breeze cascaded her skin, and a warm black bean coffee slithered down the back of her throat, before being plunged head first into a serial-child-murder case—then it was more than clear that the

gravity of her situation was yet to descend on her. Julia Miller's emphatic squeal was the farthest thing from staggering, if anything; it was expected and very easily overlooked. Although Madison couldn't seem to tear her tropical sapphire blues away from the men who strode calmly out of her home adorned in pitch black suits underneath the glare of the tender morning sun. She'd locked her doors before bustling across her lawn and over to Adam's. So who were these men and how had they broken into her home?

Her ears were deaf from where she stood. It seemed however from the starchy look on Adam Walker's features, he had a pretty good guess who those men were. There was a flutter, a little pick-me-up her heart did when his eyes of spring met hers. Maybe it had a thing or two to do with the gaze of concern he'd pinned her down with. "Get in the house, into my bedroom and if you don't hear my voice; don't come out." His orders were simple, straight to the point and clear; she was in danger, but what kind of danger?

"Who are those men?" She'd opened her question to either one of the men glaring at her lawn. They obviously seemed to know more than she did. "And how in the name of Arthur Bühl did they get into my house?" She flicked her gaze back to her front yard that at the moment was crawling with suit clad men, just how many were they? And oh good lordie lord was Julia in any danger? Her mother might be a heel in her toe, but she'd raised her and helped her raise Tucker when her high school sweetheart had scuttled from the tight belt of parenting like a frightened school girl.

The weight of an arm on her shoulder whacked-aside her fright-filled thoughts. Faint trails of black orchids swivelled up her nostrils, his body heat radiated onto hers, and this time, her heart did a little more than a pick-me-up leap. "You trust me, don't you Maddy?" Her teeth clenched, but for a

different reason. She wasn't mad, but rather fighting the urge not to turn into a puddle of delicate lust at the way her name curled off his tongue. She nodded. "Then go into my room, lock the door and don't open it for anyone besides Gates and me." With one more straying glance onto her property, she twirled and vanished behind his thick wooden doors all the while wondering who the men in black were.

. . .

Adam Walker's temples were a base drum, his eyes, tired windows looking onto a drably frosty morning. His day had merely just begun and he was smack dab in the middle of a serial-child-murder case. He was going to need a lot more than some extra-strength Tylenol and a good long drag from a stick of Winston when this was over. No, when this entire case was over, he would rethink his decision lingering with a force that had clearly moved on without him. He would deliberate the time he'd spent engaged in odd jobs holding in his heart the recollections of his time serving his country, he would meditate on the assumptions he'd had of Concord Mills reaching out to him with an offer he couldn't refuse. It had been much too long since he'd been detective Adam Walker and he only seemed to be drifting farther and farther away from what was now a mere memory. And maybe, just maybe that wasn't a bad thing?

With his store purchased Glock 26 9mm sub-compact 10 round pistol strapped flush to his belt buckle, Adam shadowed behind Ryan Gates, the soft crunch of damp grass and overlooked twigs snapping beneath their feet. The nibbling breeze and drizzle slapped both men with each step, their chill was instant. They seemed unbothered. By Madison Miller's porch gathered the men in black; men Adam could bet a lucky penny were FBI agents and he could only worry that his suspicions would be confirmed.

“Detective Gates and Officer Walker,” Ryan Gates’ gaze, just for a moment, twitched to Adam, almost as if to say; *just play along*. He returned his focused eyes to the clump of men. Adam on the other hand had his eyes of spring shilly-shallying to Julia Miller, the one woman who would know in a heartbeat just where her daughter was. He needed to get to her before she assumed Madison’s whereabouts, before she drew any attention to his home. For the love of all things holy, Adam didn’t want to think of what he would have to do if these men pried their way into his home.

“Special agent Spencer Black; with the FBI. We have reason to believe the resident of this house is responsible for the kidnap of Ethan Daniels—”

“They have a flock of you get down here for a kidnapping? Goddamn, I guess they’ll have the entire Bureau down here for whoever is responsible for the damn murders.” Were murderous looks considered a capital offence? Adam entertained the meandering thought. The lethal-glare Spencer Black pinned the former detective with nearly bore a hole in the centre of his head.

“What was that Mr. Walker? Because as far as we’re concerned we gave the CMPD a long enough rope.” It seemed louder, each threateningly slow click of special agent Black’s boots descending against Madison’s porch steps. He stopped two steps from the base, close enough to Adam and Ryan. “But guess what, that rope was bound to finish sometime.”

“This mean the CMPD no longer has jurisdiction over this case?” Ryan Gates barked, almost as if his brain had stuttered. His feet tapped against the base of Madison Miller’s porch steps, seemingly in a nervous spasm. “I clearly think I would get the memo.”

“You know I expected such idiotic questions from the low ranked officer here,” Black made a reference to Adam

Walker. "Check your inbox, Gates. We're partners now, it's time for the big dogs to come out and play with the pups." Spencer Black whiffed past both men and clustered with his colleagues by the driveway. Adam took the time to filter away from Gates and converse with a still frantic Julia Miller.

"What is going on and good golly where is my daughter? None of these men have been any help, bless their heart." The age-less Julia Miller growled, her eyes fluttering towards the back of Spencer Black's head.

"Look, you know they want to arrest her for the kidnapping of Ethan Daniels, right?" The dramatic woman with hair of earthy hues and eyes much like the morning sky huffed.

"Of course, I'm not stupid. That's why I got here as fast as I could; I wanted to pull her out of this baby-sitting-gone-wrong drama." As she spoke, she gestured, her jewellery clinking and clanking with her words. "Now where in the name of fresh hell is my daughter?"

"I'll take you to her, but you have to promise not to draw any attention." Adam said; his voice a hushed whisper. Ryan Gates joined him and the clearly over-dressed woman.

"She's at your place isn't she?" Julia Miller blared. Spencer Black's head whirled. God damn it!

Chapter Nine

Alexander Hemmings' head felt thick, stuffed to the point of overflowing with the concerns he'd with time shoved up there. He had to return the boy... Gosh! He had to return him, as if he were a shirt he'd picked up from the thrift store in the wrong hue of green. For a moment, a brief one, the thought tickled his fancy, just enough for a throaty chuckle to slip into the silence. Whatever the case, sending the troubled boy home wasn't going to be that easy; no, with that nanny of his hightailing to the cops... she'd just added more thorns than petals to the dreadful fucking rosebush that was his life.

His throat grumbled with a suppressed groan, his fists crashed against the splintering wood of the worn kitchen table. He'd royally fucked biscuits! The CMPD might not have much trailing back to him, but they had something and something was too much. More than once he'd appeared in the background of security footage at Cotswold Elementary. And he might not have hair clinging to his head; he still had fingerprints he ought to have left scattered about the benches by Cotswold Elementary. But that wasn't enough to charge him... right? He could have been checking out the school for a kid he wanted to enrol... Was that a believable enough alibi? What if they checked his story out and uncovered that he didn't have a kid?

He leaped to his feet; the fragmenting screech of the wooden dining table chair grinding against the floor filled his ears. He turned to Peter, his roommate of over two years blacked out half naked on the living room couch, he huffed. He could swear that man only woke up for liquor and hookers ... *As far as he pays the rent...*

“I’m off you old piece of shit, don’t die while I’m gone.” Alex mumbled, the heavy thump of his boot clad feet shuffling about the squashed one-room-apartment for his keys and cell phone. Peter might not be awake most of the day, but they sure as hell had more of a conversation than when the man was up and kicking.

Out the door, Alexander Hemmings was the farthest thing from pleased by the slapping morning weather. He wasn’t much for prayers but for the love of everything he owned he couldn’t have another Sebastian Trey on his hands. He could swear that kids parents were shit, they were barely feeding the little twat... no wonder a little deprivation from the better things had killed him before the barrel of Alexander Hemming’s .38 special could kiss his forehead. Ethan seemed like a well off kid... and he’d offered him three cookie packs from Wal-Mart. Did the little shit think he was better than Wal-Mart cookies; in his position? Nah, that couldn’t be it. He would eat them, eventually... even if Alex had to grind it up and shove it down his nose.

Although a part of him hoped it wouldn’t come to that.

What if it all went away? All of it; the bustling noise of pedestrians, the scuttling of mothers with their kids and the whirling of cars darting through the streets—What if he didn’t live smack dab in the middle of downtown? Well for one, he sure as hell wouldn’t be driven partially insane from night after night of night terrors. He wasn’t a man to regret, but recently, the warmth of a slow burning rue has been crawling its way up his gut. Through the streets, Hemmings had his shoulders hunched and head buried in his collar. He was a ghost drifting unseen in plain sight.

Super heroes weren’t always there for the victims. That didn’t mean he couldn’t become one for someone else. Where he’d been ignored, overlooked and made to feed only on a steady diet of play-ground sand, crunching on rocks

and twigs and washing it down with stale toilet water, while his ribs ached from being kicked and shoved; he wasn't going to let another kid go through that. He wasn't going to let Ethan go through that. He couldn't forget the rage that sent an arson through his lower abdomen. He'd wanted blood shed on his behalf and on the behalf of every ten year old that had to endure even a quarter of what he'd endured. He couldn't forget the long look his mother had worn each time he'd had to make an emergency visit to their local hospital for food poisoning, for a tetanus shot or just for her klutz of a son to be supervised. The strain of keeping up with him, of losing more money to his health care had eventually killed her even before his abusive father had the chance. Heading up town, he forked left striding with an agitating patience. He'd learned with time running to the boys drew attention. He didn't need that. Ethan Daniels would wait... he wouldn't die because Alex didn't want him to... Oh God what if he'd already died from trauma?

. . .

The soft eerie creek of Adam Walker's front door had goose-bumps running down Madison Miller's limp noodle arms. She'd caught it, lodged in her throat was her breath. She'd listened, there were more footsteps than she'd expected. *One... Two, One... Two, One... Two...* There were at the very least three people in the living room. Further, she'd pressed her ears to his bedroom door. Fucking fish fingers she wanted to peek, to pull the door open just an inch and stick her eyes out. She couldn't forget just how his bedroom door had slammed shut with little an effort on her part. If she opened it, there was no doubt whoever those men were would snatch her up. But oh good lord She'd never really liked being left out, no her curiosity would always ravish her from the inside out. It was obvious those men had to be with

some sort of law enforcement, the CIA? FBI? They wanted her. Why else would they have broken into her home, probably looking for evidence, anything that pointed at a motive for the kidnap of Ethan Daniels? Oh Goodness! Did they sincerely believe she was responsible for Ethan's kidnap? Of course they did, they wouldn't have come all the way down here if they didn't. Could Alexander Hemmings have put them up to this? He'd managed to kill ten innocent, helpless ten-year-olds; it wouldn't startle her that he had the power to get the CIA to look into her being responsible. But why after he'd called her with wails of remorse. Oh! He'd gotten a tip that she'd tattled on him. Why hadn't she kept her lips sealed! Why in the world had she trusted the police when they'd turned their back on her during Tucker Miller's kidnap?

And in that moment pressed against the wooden door, she wanted to turn back the clock.

She knew what those parents were going through; she would never put any other parent through what she'd endured—the helplessness, the chill that hugged her heart tightly, the ceaseless dampness of tear streaked cheeks—It was clear she wouldn't be able to prove her innocence from behind bars. If those men were here in Adam Walker's home, she needed to leave, to get far enough away and find Ethan; his testimony would be enough to free her. She was running from the feds... Would she become wanted? One of the most wanted in Charlotte? Oh God that was not the kind of on screen time she needed with this story! All she wanted to do was tell it, not live it.

"We're going to search the room Mr. Walker because we believe that you could be concealing a fugitive!" Blared a voice mere inches from the bedroom door. Bloody hell!

. . .

He didn't want to do it; to open fire on a federal officer. But his hands were tied, bound behind his back and he didn't have much of a choice. With hands quaking, moist, he'd pictured it; Spencer Black forcing his way through the thick wooden door of his bedroom, holding Madison Miller at gun point. Her shriek like a frenzied banshee would ricochet off the walls. Thoughts much like that didn't belong in his head. He needed them out.

"Cut it out Black," A voice from the kitchen said. The man had clearly been rummaging through the drawers and refrigerator for something, anything edible. There was hardly anything for Adam in there. "You and I both know you don't have a warrant and our laws prohibit us from poking around the poor man's household, most especially the household of an officer." There was something about the way he'd said the word *officer* that had Adam's jaw clenching. With arms raised in mock surrender, Spencer backed away from the bedroom door.

"You're hiding something Walker and whatever it is, you're going to prison for it, I have a gut feeling." Spencer spat. In a swift motion, he'd turned and darted out the door.

Adam Walker knew the likelihood of escaping a sentence; even a light one was highly unlikely. He'd impersonated an officer, obstructed justice, and provided a false alibi. At the very least he was looking at a three year sentence stowed away with societies rejects.

"Can we at the very least ask you gentlemen some questions?" The man from the kitchen in slow strategic strides, paced further into the living room, eyes of soil brown trailing the pictures that lined Adam Walker's summer green walls. Pictures of Sarah Walker Adam had adamantly left up almost as if thoughts of her didn't torment him enough. On the wall hung wedding pictures of her flowing gracefully; a bride in snow white. Anniversary pictures with both their

grins lighting up the room brighter than any light or window. Once upon a time, he'd looked upon them and as at then, all he'd seen were more and more reasons to fall for the woman who'd selflessly put him first who'd shown him that love existed. Once upon a time, he'd looked upon them and as at then, he'd seen his wife. His wife! He'd had the best wife on the goddamn planet! And with time she was nothing more than a headstone and a place on the ground he needed to pay for regular weeding. "I'm Officer Charlie Wallace, and before you get all tensed, your answers are off the record. I just want to talk."

"What would you like to know?" Gates asked.

"We have reason to believe Miss. Miller, who was last seen with the ten-year-old Ethan Daniels could be accountable for his disappearance."

"And what's the motive?" Adam forced.

"Surveying the crime scene leads us to believe that she could have tugged the boy away shortly after he'd been left in her custody. We're of the belief that the breaking-and-entering in the Daniel's home was a hoax, an alibi."

"That doesn't answer my question Wallace, what was her damn motive?" Adam snapped.

"We've been doing some digging and; she barely earns grains from watching neighbourhood children. A ransom from the Daniels will pay big bucks. Not to mention, she has been enduring the sudden death of her son Tucker Patrick Miller; a boy who was kidnapped from a breaking and entering to her very own Bertonley Avenue home. We hope if we can ask her some questions she'll confess and hopefully lead us to the boy."

"I don't know what ya'll mean men think you have against my sugar dumpling, but she did not kidnap that Ethan boy!" Julia Miller rose to her daughter's defence. "For all we know

she could be in danger and you fancy-dressed-powerless-wastes-of-time can't do your job and protect her from whatever is coming."

"Ma'am, we get you're distressed but we just want to ask your daughter some questions."

"Like I told your flock at her house that ya'll have torn apart like a freak Iowa tornado, I don't know where the hell she is." The turbulent woman folded her hands over her enlarged chest. "Heck if I'll even tell ya' when I find her." She'd grumbled beneath her breath.

"Ma'am withholding essential information from a federal officer is an offence." Charlie Wallace replied. He turned to Adam and Gates.

"Look, from one officer to another. This is a case with too many loopholes. For all we know it could be linked to the serial child kidnappings and murders that has easily become a trend here in Charlotte. And I know all you men want is to put an end to it. It's what we want to." He ambled towards the front door, a finger signalling to his colleagues to follow. He stopped. "Just call me if she comes back, she's not in any danger *if* she's innocent. I give you my word."

And with that, one by one, each federal officer trooped out of the front door the way they'd come, including detective Ryan Gates who much like Charlie Wallace paused at the threshold. He looked onto Adam.

"Look, that chick you've got there," His voice was a whisper one tinged with the sincere concern of a dear friend. "She's a whole lot of trouble right now and it might seem right keeping her around, but she has to leave before you get your ass hauled to prison for some love-affair that's never going to take flight." Adam was tempted, tugged by the urge to argue, rather in a twist, he bit tongue and nodded letting his former partner turn away and vanish off his porch.

"I thought you said she was here?" Rasped Julia Miller, in a tone of raw accusation. He once more acknowledged her presence.

"My bedroom, the door should be unlocked." He nodded towards the door at the far end. As her heels clicked against the parquet, he slumped on the couch running a hand through his hair.

He needed a plan one that wasn't going to risk Madison Miller's life and freedom.

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There were many things Madison Miller detested, being seen in a moment of weakness with sapphire blue eyes shimmering beneath her lashes, glazed over with a pending cry while her cheeks wailed of the line of tears that had run down to her chin was at the top of the list. Following quickly behind was being seen by the woman who made everything an epic tale. Madison Miller wasn't perfect; she'd never assumed she was. She'd made mistakes, bad decisions. But overall, she'd come out of every situation stronger. When she'd stood on liquid legs at sixteen, in her pale hands a positive pregnancy test, she'd thought her world had been crumbling. *How would she go back to school? What would her friends think? Would the father step up?* At the time, she'd been at her lowest. It could always get lower. When Tucker had been taken from his room, helpless she was sure she wouldn't make it out of that situation. For the love of god, she'd felt like the worst mother there could be! *Her own son had been snatched away from under her nose, from her own home!* And even when he'd died, her the world around her continued to spin, ignorant of her loss, her grief, the simmering ache that threatened to choke her. She wasn't the best at anything, but she'd learned with time, she wasn't

the worst. And despite knowing this, like a knife wedged into her chest, Charlie Wallace's words hurt.

She dropped Julia's lingering gaze. In those eyes, those familiar eyes held sympathy, pity, everything Madison didn't want thrown in her direction. "Now don't you go hiding from ya' Mamma. I know those bad-bad men said some really hurtful things, but if there's one thing I know, my baby ain't a child killer." Julia sat on the foot of the bed, just close enough to where Madison had been crouched on the floor.

"What you need Darling is to hightail your sweet behind out of this city. Come back to mine, just for a bit... till the heat dies down and till Walker can catch this nutcase." Madison would be lying if she said the thought of cuddling in her childhood home in South Carolina didn't entice her. It did, but she was responsible for Ethan. She'd been when he'd gone missing and she still was, she still will be until he was found and returned to his family home here in Charlotte.

"Don't you dare fling me one of those your flimsy half-arsed excuses! You're coming with me young-lady. Remember you won't be much help if the FBI has you detained in some holding cell doing who knows what to get you to talk,"

"She's right." Adam added from the bedroom door. Madison looked at him with pleading eyes. He'd made up his mind. "Just for a while. I'll keep you posted. Gates and I have got this." She dropped his gaze and returned hers to Julia Miller's.

"I will be back as soon as I can, as soon as the heat dies down or as soon as Adam and Ryan get their hands on a major lead."

She'd done this before. She'd run-away from her situation when it had her by the neck. She'd fled Charlotte for her childhood home in Greenville South Carolina when the grief for Tucker had knockout her breath. Why did it feel like she was doing it again, running when times got tough?

Chapter Ten

When Madison Miller had gotten the second official call from Alexander Hemmings, she'd been seated with eyes fluttered shut on the grounded plane DL-753 to Greenville, Julia Miller stretched rummaging through the overhead luggage compartment for her earphones in her purse. Madison would have thought after the ruckus the woman had made on the afternoon ride down to the airport about not being able to use the airplane headphones that she would have hers out. It was beside the point. Madison's eyes had darted to her blaring phone, cheeks blazing from attracting curious eyes. She hadn't ignored the call. After all, she'd made a fuss about Adam Walker and detective Ryan Gates keeping her informed. What if they wanted to notify her that Charlie Wallace and his men had followed her? Oh good lordie! What if they were on the plane? Would they make a scene or quietly tug her off the plane?

The voice on the other end of the line wasn't that of Adam or Ryan. And it sure as hell wasn't filling her in on the whereabouts of Charlie Wallace and his equally intimidating goons. No, it was more sinister and lacked the hint of remorse she'd recognized in their last call. Alexander Hemming's voice had been calm, calculated, a whisper into her very own ears. "You want to see the boy? We can talk. Just the three of us, no cops, no wires. I'll be at your place at 6:00 P.M." She'd been left wide-eyed, panicked and restless listening to the beeping of a dead connection. She needed more than anything to get off the plane. The idea of being escorted off the plane even if it was by Charlie and his goons was sounding very appealing at the moment.

Thoughtlessly, she'd leaped from her seat, almost immediately jerked back by the loose leather seat belt that

hung around her waist. She'd fumbled with it, but only for a little while. Her breathing shallow and legs itching to bolt for the nearest exit. She felt claustrophobic, trapped. Julia Miller much like the flight attendants were obstacles she'd shoved out of her way as she'd bolted for the back exit. The one door she'd come in from. "I need to get off this flight." She pleaded with the attendant by the exit. The lean dark skinned man looked upon her with eyes of regret. "Look my husband is dying. I just got a call from his doctor. I need to be with him now!" The man with dark eyes continued to shut the door to the back exit, shaking his head. This couldn't be happening!

"The stairs to this door have already been dethatched." He let his shoulders slump. He released a sigh. "First class is still accepting passengers. You can exit through there. I'll clear a path." He sealed the door and led her down the narrow lanes weaving through economy and business class. As she'd followed, she'd been aware of the numerous eyes that rose and trailed her. She hadn't been deaf to the whispers.

What's going on? Who is she? Probably a stow-away! She clearly didn't pay for the flight! But there was a single whisper she couldn't ignore; a mumble more appropriately. *There was an update wasn't there?* Julia Miller's soft murmur had tugged at her. What were mother's for if not understanding their kids with little an explanation. The lean dark man paused at the entrance door to first-class. He'd slurred something to his colleague who nodded but continued to welcome their esteemed customers. Twitchy, she'd glimpsed her watch it was 4:49 P.M. It had taken her and Julia Miller two hours to drive down to the airport. She would be late, but she couldn't lose this opportunity. The ball was in Hemming's court, it was his game and she was determined to win it.

. . .

When she'd got the third call, at about 5:50 P.M. she'd been lodged in traffic, shoved into the back seat of a cab, darn near ripping her hair out. What if he'd killed the boy and he wanted her to collect his body? Oh heavens! Was this karma for something she'd done? Was this because she'd ignored her mother's warnings and had premarital sex in an isolated bathroom stall at her junior prom? Was that why she'd had complete shitty luck with children? Was that why her son had died and now another woman's son would die in a similar way?

Impatient, she'd responded to his call, easily overlooking the agitation in his tone. "We're by a bench at Cotswold Elementary. Come alone or the boy dies." Her chest filled with hope. She could make it. The traffic had been deterring her from making her way home. Cotswold Elementary would be a breeze. "Cotswold Elementary!" She wailed to the driver who grumbled, but leaned his car towards Chiswick road. The closer she got, the louder the voices in her head became. What if she was making a mistake, walking into a trap? What if he would still kill Ethan either way? What if he'd already killed him and was going to frame her with a video confession at gun-point? What if he kills Ethan, Kills her and kills himself? A complete end to a perfect crime! Was it too late to call Adam or Ryan? She hadn't had much of an option, because just as she'd been hauled into her very own hysterical reverie, she'd been yanked from it by the car pulling to a stop. Compensating the troubled driver she'd climbed out into the chirpy evening air.

Then came the hour of 6:00 P.M. and the sun sank lower in the sky, light of day draining away, giving way to the velvety dark of night, crickets chirping a symphony to her thundering heartbeat, dusky, colours subdued in the fading light.

She hadn't seen them at first, perched beneath an old larger than life oak tree at the far end of the street looking into the elementary schools' playground. But when she had, she'd filled with a sudden thrill. Because next to a man concealed with a hood, sat a tattered boy, legs kicking and head turned away from her. He was alive, Ethan Daniels was alive! At least until the first gunshot had gone off.

. . .

"Come alone. The instructions were simple!" Hemmings groaned. Concealed beneath a dark hood, she could only what he wanted her to see, his face was a mere shadow beneath the dark hood. "Do you want me to kill him? Because I can you tattling bitch!" The man who'd been hunched next to the lean little boy sprung to his feet, he'd done it so suddenly, she'd nearly leaped back. Planted in place, Madison couldn't help but trail his .38 special. He was quite different from what she'd initially imagined serial child killer Alexander Hemmings to resemble; he wasn't a stout small man with eyes of death and skin of bleach. He wasn't tall, neither was he all that built. No, quite the opposite, he was lean, lanky almost withering away beneath the hood.

"I am alone!" She kept her distance. She didn't want to set off the trigger-happy hooded man. Although a part of her feared that despite her stillness if he were to be triggered, he would be set off by her mere presence. Did that mean he really didn't want to hurt Ethan?

"And that dead cab driver was what?" The poor man had been rounding the corner out of the street. She'd clearly made a mistake walking into this alone. What if she said the wrong thing and he killed her? Or killed Ethan just to spite her for telling on him to the police? "You're getting rid of that," He shrugged, looking onto the deceased man hunched over in his cab. No, he couldn't mean that! She'd never even disposed of a body before! She couldn't help it,

the single tear that rolled down her cheek or the muffled sob that shook her petite frame.

"As you can see the little rat is unharmed, so stop fucking blubbering!" Hemmings continued, gesturing the barrel of the gun towards the boy who sat still, his eyes begging her to do something, anything. The longer she'd stared, the weaker she'd felt. Oh jeepers! She hoped to God the safety of that gun was on. "I want to return him back to you unharmed... I do..."

"What do you want, money? I'll sell my house! Sex? Take me instead; just leave Ethan out of it, please!" She begged. He chuckled into the night, and another sob ran through her body

"All very tempting offers, but I want you to turn yourself in. Not just for his kidnap but for all the kidnaps and murders. Think about it as a great sacrifice." Hemmings cackled, it was deep, throaty. "And don't worry too much about him," Once more Hemmings gestured to the young boy. "He'll be returned once you're arrested, charged and detained for your crimes."

"Don't think too much about the offer, you have until noon on Friday next week to decide or I kill him before my flight out of this shitty city." He menacingly added after a beat.

"Please!" Madison begged just as a stray tear ran down her cheek.

"Begging will get you nowhere. Now get rid of the body." He turned away from her, and then added. "If you attack me or follow me, I will kill the both of you." He continued towards the boy, easing him off the bench and farther away from her. She should have called Adam when she had the chance.

. . .

She was off base... No, not off base, she'd completely struck out! She was supposed to talk to this... this lunatic and reach a deal, and now what? She had a dead body, a ten-year-old boy still at large and a confirmation that he was indeed with the same man responsible for the kidnap and murder of the ten ten-year-old boys. What exactly had she been thinking walking into this? That someone unstable enough to murder children would listen to her? Pfft! Pathetic! She'd thought that meeting him, she would negotiate a lighter sentence and he would return the boy, hadn't that been what she and Adam organized? That was the plan! He was supposed to get immunity for the deaths and go down for the kidnapping. She'd forgotten all of that when push came to shove.

As for the body of the deceased cab driver, she didn't want to dispose of it. Heck, she didn't even know how! She felt helpless, trapped while a gale raged around her. But she knew two things; one, she couldn't be caught with the body, not while she was wanted by the FBI. And two, she couldn't just leave him there for someone else to find... What if an investigation was carried out and her fingerprints were found in his car? All hopes of slipping out of this situation with very little jail-time will be a thing of the past. Peeking through the window of the car, she felt sick to her stomach, nauseous, queasy and in every way uneasy. Sat before her, now pooled in his own blood was the Latina man she'd ridden with, the grumpy cab driver who merely wanted to make ends meet. She didn't know him, not personally, but now she was standing by his pale, limp corpse wondering just what to do. Alexander Hemmings wanted the man's body done away with and she didn't want to get on his bad side. But was it worth getting on the wrong side of the law? Yes! She didn't need to think too much about it, it was worth it; after all, the life of a ten-year-old boy was on the line, potentially Alexander Hemmings next and final victim.

But then how would turning herself in bring the police any closer to solving this case? And what if getting rid of this body would further stump the authorities? She was running out of time and it was clear she couldn't do this alone. So, with trembling hands, she'd pulled out her phone and done what she should have done before running headfirst into this meeting, she called Adam Walker and boy was she relieved to hear his voice.

Almost as if his; "Hello?" Had pulled her out of her rampant thoughts. On restless feet that carried her further into the bushes that lined the street, and a voice that had dropped to a hushed whisper as the wails of the night crawlers filled the air, she pleaded... begged for his help.

"There's a body by Chiswick road, just outside Cotswold Elementary by the playground... a dead body and I need to get rid of it."

"I don't have much time to explain, but I didn't do it!" She found herself frantic. The last thing she needed was him turning on her.

"I don't know what we're going to need but I think a rug, some tape... or ropes and kerosene?" When he didn't respond, she added; "Never mind, we'll just dump him in the lake!" He still hadn't responded. "Please say something!" She could hear it loudly, so loudly at first it had startled her, her own heart thundering in her chest.

"Gates is around the corner, he'll be with you in ten. Don't move and don't get caught." Easy, so all she had to do was not move from the crime scene and not get caught by the crime scene. She was most certainly screwed!

With the phone line as dead as the Latina cab driver, Madison Miller took it upon herself to do what she did best, contradict orders and follow her gut. Sincerely, how much more trouble could she get into? She set off further into the

bushes. She'd continued further, glad to be completely out of sight of any wandering FBI agent or pedestrian that might just jog up with a dog and find her by the body. What would she do then? Shed crocodile tears? Seem frantic? What would be her alibi? With each crunch of an isolated twig beneath her feet, she felt more and more alone. Not just in the dense bushes that now that she thought about it was crawling with mosquitoes and bugs, but she felt alone in this case, in her decision. Was she really going to turn herself in? At best she would be looking at a death sentence, or life in prison with no option of fine or at the very least, she could beat down her sentence to eighty years on appeal. But then what? The man behind the murders would roam free? The police would close the case and deem it dismissed? But then a frightened child, a child much like Tucker will be returned to the waiting arms of his mother.

No, she couldn't turn herself in, not until she'd spoken to detective Ryan Gates and Adam Walker. They're officers that were on her side. They would know what to do, they had to! And when they thought about that boy, Ethan Daniels whose mother had probably made more press briefings than she'd emotionally been prepared to, both men would know what to tell Madison. She couldn't forget when Tucker had been kidnapped how she'd poured her heart to the media beckoning anyone to come forward with her son. At the time she'd been a frightened young mother who just wanted her son back. And she hadn't had the time to catch up with the Daniels or with the news, but she was sure Lauren and Parker had taken to T.V. screens to plead for the return of their son.

She hadn't wandered too far when her phone blared in her pocket, if she thought her heart couldn't gallop any faster, she was wrong. With hands that shook worse than a cold Chihuahua, she pulled out her phone and swiped to answer the unregistered number. "I'm here where are you?"

Gates! He was fast, and Madison Miller was lost, somewhere in a dense bush. What turns had she taken? Did she fork left by the leaning pine tree? Or right? Backwards wouldn't she have to take the opposite? This, this is why she ought not defy clear simple orders. She had to find detective Ryan Gates, she had to know what the plan was, because it clear she couldn't handle matters on her own. But gosh did she have questions for Hemmings, like why did he need her in particular to take the fall for his crimes? And where in heavens name had he gotten her number from? She wanted to believe that morning Lauren had called, she'd left Madison's number sketched somewhere, somewhere open to anyone waltzing through her home, if not did that mean Hemmings had been targeting specifically Madison? Nah! "Where are you?" Ryan Gates asked again.

"In the bushes by the street... I don't exactly know where I am but we can bury the body here!"

"What body?" He hadn't noticed the deceased Latina cab driver's body. Was that good? Did that mean other officers wouldn't pay too much attention to it at least until it began to rut?

"There's cab in the area. The driver, he's dead." Gates cursed, not once, not twice, but three times. "I didn't do it... Well, I'm sort of the reason this poor man is dead... but I swear on my dear Momma's life that I didn't shoot this man!"

"Madison there are officers patrolling this entire bloody area for you and you're telling me you caused a shooting?" Through the line she could hear his footsteps; he'd probably taken into the bushes to look for her. "Don't move a muscle, I'm coming to get you I have a safe house on the outskirts of town where you are going to be until Walker and I can rope this deranged madcap."

"That's precisely the problem; I can't lie low until this whole thing blows over."

"And why the hell not?" He sounded winded. "Look I'm not Walker I don't have feelings for you that would make me want to keep you around, you're getting in the way of this investigation and the best I can do is keep you from causing any more damage to yourself and this case."

"I met the killer, Ryan! I saw Ethan. I am not getting in the way of this investigation; I didn't choose to get hauled smack dab in the middle of it! I can't go away because I need to turn myself in so that boy can be returned to his mother."

. . .

She'd heard of the butterfly-effect; a butterfly would flap its wings and somewhere at the other end of the world, a hurricane would rage. She couldn't help feeling like sitting helpless on the passenger's side of detective Ryan Gates state issued cop car while the bloody cab of the Latina cab man was towed along, she were flapping her wings and somewhere at the other end of town, a hurricane was erupting. At this time, perhaps his family were pushed to the wall with concern. After all, it was just a little past midnight. 12:09 A.M. to be specific. Maybe he had a wife and kids and they'd called his cell phone more than a dozen times? Maybe they'd begun questioning their neighbours? Sincerely, what would the poor man's family going to think when they found his body washed up at somewhere at the shores of Briar's Creek? And his cab? How in the world were Madison and Ryan going to get rid of it? It sure as hell wouldn't sink to the bottom quick enough.

Initially, she'd thought of Gate's plan as completely out of it; smashing the windscreen of the entire cab as well as the bumper and then tugging the limp lifeless carcass into the floor of the back seat, what had he been thinking? And even still she hadn't disputed. No, she'd watched; it wasn't like

she had a better idea. "Explain to me again why you need to turn yourself in—you sure as hell won't, but why do you have to?" She turned to him from where her eyes had been trailing the Krispy Kreme, Chick-Fil-A and Smashburger buildings that lined Randolph Road as they breezed along. Ryan Gates rode the streets with a calmness, his eyes only for a second peeling from the road to meet hers.

"Ethan... Lauren... Parker..." She nibbled on her bottom lip. "When I lost my son, I was willing to do anything to get him back before something happened to him. I can only assume that's what those parents; Lauren and Parker Daniels must be going through... and what's worse is Lauren once told me something... Something I should have taken into consideration before taking up her babysitting offer..." Madison trailed off, just for a moment. She recalled when they'd first met, when the young mother had recently moved in down the streets with her aloof husband. At the time Madison had thought; Yes! A woman her age, a woman she could relate with. So they'd talked, not a lot, but it was something.

"What did she tell you?" Detective Ryan Gates asked when it was clear Madison had gotten lost amidst her thoughts.

"Lauren couldn't have another kid—she'd struggled and prayed for years before she had Ethan—I can't just be the reason she's no longer a mother." Almost on impulse, her eyes filled with a shimmer.

"There's got to be another way."

"And on top of that, in Tucker's case when he'd been taken, I couldn't just imagine the fear he'd felt without me... He must have been cold my poor baby, hungry, lonely and in so much pain... And when I looked at Ethan today, I saw a little bit of that, just what he could let me see. And I knew I had to do whatever Hemmings wanted."

"Wait, wait, wait... Hemmings?" His eyes swerved from the road to hers.

"Alexander Hemmings."

"You mean to tell me the janitor at my precinct is responsible for the murder of the ten ten-year old boys?" She blinked, at the same time a tear rolled down. She didn't know too much about Hemmings or even if he were the right person, she'd merely carried along the impression Adam Walker had given her. And he'd seemed convinced beyond a reasonable doubt that Alexander Hemmings was responsible for the murders and she'd met with a man she'd only believed was Hemmings. "You do know if I pour the states resources into investigating this crook and he turns out to be the wrong person, your ass is going to be in deeper shit, right?" She bit her lip further. She didn't know anything anymore. "Hell, both our asses are going to be in shit."

For the longest time, they'd ridden in silence along Wendover Road, until he'd said; "Continue, what exactly did this man, *Hemmings*, want you to do?"

"Turn myself in... before noon on Friday next week or he'll kill Ethan and leave Charlotte." The silence continued on along Sharon Road and Runnymed Lane. By the sharp right into Colony road, she'd rippled the silence. "Look into Hemmings, he's our only lead and even if we get the wrong guy, we tried and that boy could have more of a chance at freedom because I don't even know if Hemmings will keep up his end of the bargain after I'm charged."

"I take it his end of the bargain is returning Ethan to his family." Ryan Gates mumbled just as a light flashed before his eyes. He slammed on the brakes bringing the car to a sudden halt and the towed cab smashing into his rear. The impact sent his car jolting forward, slightly but with enough force to shove him against his seatbelt. For the love of God! *Could this night get any worse?* Thought a grumpy Ryan

Gates. He turned to the lone patrol officer whose waste line seemed to be stretching the lining of his pants a little too far. The chubby man did away with the flash light he'd shimmered in Gates eyes.

"A fellow member of the force!" Chimed the trouper. "And where might you be headed sir?" Madison Miller couldn't hide it, the cold sweat that broke out. She felt like that time she'd been pulled over at sixteen after her junior prom for driving under the influence. She'd denied it flat, and even still she'd been tugged along to a holding cell. She doubted it would be a holding cell she would be taken to when they found the body in the backseat with a bullet hole to his head. Holy fuck biscuits!

"On our way home at Picardy good sir, my wife here was just in an accident completing her last ride of the night and needed me to come get her." The lone trouper leaned further, eyes running over Madison, he seemed sceptical. "I would love to sit and chat sir, but she's pretty shaken up, so if you don't mind..." Gates leaned the car forward. The trouper patted his hands over the roof of the car almost insinuating Gate's shouldn't move a muscle.

"Try to stay safe ya'll Charlotte isn't that safe a place anymore, especially with the murders going around and I know that it's not our jurisdiction no more, but golly do I wish we could do something to these damn killers!" The trouper rambled on.

"What do you mean killers?" Ryan Gates frowned. Madison was sure this time her heart was going to kill her. This clearly wasn't the time for small talk; they had a body to get rid of!

"Over at Cotswold a few hours ago, there were complaints of a disturbance; a gunshot going off. Although I don't know what precinct you serve, but Providence Division was pretty laid back on their response to the complaints, kind of out of

character since they've had their eyes out for the alleged woman responsible for the missing Daniels kid." She hadn't been able to stop it, the thick, chunky green vomit that spilled from her lips, momentarily choking her as she leaned to direct the spray onto the floor, a useless attempt since it spilled along the dashboard, her clothes and shoes and the floor of the cop car. "Fuck!" Gates screamed. He turned to the troupers. "It was real nice chatting up..." His eyes ran over the trouper's name tag. Philip. "Officer Philip, but I really need to get my wife home, she really is in shock." With his face scrunched up, the officer gave them the go ahead to drive along home. Ryan Gates hadn't heard it immediately, after all, for a while through the lone Colony Road he'd listened to only her dry heaving, or what he hoped was just dry heaving. But when he'd heard the soft sob that further sent trembles rolling through her, he felt his heart soften, just as he'd pulled to a stop over Briar Creek where the waves surfed at a pace that would defiantly carry the body of the Latina cab man, not too far, but at least far enough and with enough force that if his body did wash up, forensics would be stumped with no clues as to who was responsible for disposing the body.

"It's going to get better." It wasn't a promise, it wasn't even an assurance, but he sure as hell hoped it got her into ship enough shape to help him log the cab man's body from his back seat.

"No, it's not!" She shook her head. God damn it! This was not the place for a damn hysteria. "That boy is suffering because of my shitty luck with children, he's probably going to be traumatized his entire life and even though I get him back, I have to live with that guilt! I'm going to go to jail for being an accomplice to a murder among other fucking crimes I've committed since I took up that damn babysitting job that morning!"

"Look Madison, I don't know what to tell you right now, so I'm going to be honest. We have a body to throw into the creek, a shitty plan that is going to get my ass hauled to prison as well, okay? So before we settle with the realisation that we are all going to prison, we should get rid of this body. And soon because I don't think Philip is going to sit for too long before he patrols the area again." With a bitter gulp that nearly had her gagging once more, she nodded and cracked open her door climbing out into the bracing morning breeze. The creek cried loudly almost washing away her thoughts. Carelessly, she strolled to the metal rails. They still had a bit of a walk, but not too much from over the rails. She returned to Ryan Gates who'd flung open the back door of the cop car and had the swollen Latina cab man by his shoulders. In the haze of the night she couldn't see him all too clearly, but he seemed blue-ish and that didn't sit well with her, because when she'd seen her son three days after his kidnap he'd been swollen and blue. She'd let Ryan shimmy the man further out of the car before she grabbed him by his large bare ankles.

Together they'd inched towards the rails when Ryan Gates suggested they merely toss the man over and climb over and continue on towards the creek. She complied, not necessarily thinking too much about what she was doing, but rather replaying the pleading look in Ethan Daniels eyes. Had Tucker had someone to look pleadingly at? Had he just been brutally killed with no hope of survival? Could she let another kid go through that? No! Ethan needed her. And whatever dreams she'd had to work as lead reporter for the WCCB again or at the very least weather woman for Fox26, she could kiss them goodbye, because that ten-year-old boys life mattered more than any dream she could have for herself. "Madison, please focus!" Whispered Gates, her eyes met his. "Gather some really heavy rocks from the trees we're going to fill his pockets so he has a better chance of

staying submerged under the water." Nodding she released the man's cold ankles and returned to the trees by the rails. Any hopes of finding giant rocks seemed nearly impossible with a ground filled with pebbles and stones and she was going to have to carry the entire ground of stones if she wanted to hold the bloated cab man. "We don't exactly have all day Miller!" Running her hands through her hair, she ran her eyes over floor, a small smile ghosting her lips when they landed on a gathering of rocks that seemed too heavy for her to lift. One by one, she carried them to an impatient Ryan who shoved and shoved them into the dead man's pants pockets. They could barely carry him at this point and so, they dragged him the remaining way groaning into the night, his thick form tugging a trail in the moist ground. By the water's edge, both Madison and Ryan had stopped for a breath. Once more with a heart thundering in her ears and a bitter taste on her lips, she looked at the body. He didn't deserve this, the wicked currents running over his body, filling his nose and parted purple lips. He deserved a proper funeral with his family gathered lovingly to put him to rest... Madison couldn't give him that; if the situation were any different she would have at least tried to give him what he deserved. So for now, this was all he was going to get, a place beneath Briar Creek.

Once upon a time she'd been scrolling through the Fox26 website, thrilled to fill out a job application and now? She was dumping the lifeless corpse of a Latina cab man into the lake.

Chapter Eleven

“That car is going to be a problem” Ryan Gates words were a cold dose of reality. A dose strong enough to have Madison Miller’s eyes darting from the thick dark clouds that rolled in overhead to the worthless shell of a vehicle that was once a man’s source of livelihood. Even if as she sat there next to detective Ryan Gates, feet planted on her own dried vomit, time were to stop; it wouldn’t be enough to correct the damage she’d caused picking up Lauren Daniels call that particular morning.

They’d gotten over one hurdle at about 3:15 A.M. They’d gotten rid of the body and its accompanying belongings—phone, keys, and wallet—burying them farther along the walk by Briar Creek. Clearly with the daylight sprinting along, they were not blessed with enough time left to get over yet another, at least, Madison wasn’t. How in the world were they going to get rid of the cab that still trudged behind them? They sure as hell couldn’t have left it remotely close to the body; it would draw too much attention. And Madison? She couldn’t be seen roaming through the streets in broad daylight, she would be bagged and charged for Ethan Daniels disappearance before she even knew what was what.

With the Latina Man’s remains bubbling beneath the surface, they’d left Briar creek. While breezing through Selwin Avenue towards Eastover, it had become increasingly apparent to Madison that she’d lived twenty-eight full years and if she were to turn herself in, she would be killed. Snatched from the realm of the living, but what did that mean to her? She would meet Tucker again? Would he recognize her? Would he run up to her? Would he be cloaked in all white with a glowing rim around him like Julia Miller

had made her believe when he'd died? Was there really anything after death?

Weaving along Providence road, the cabin it seemed Ryan Gates had earlier implied wasn't on the outskirts of Charlotte, somewhere up yonder like she would have preferred. No, it was smack dab in the middle of town, mere kilometres from Cotswold—where FBI agents were actively sweeping the streets for her—and Myers Park—the same place that received a stream from Briar Creek! “That's not going to be our only problem.” She pointed out nearly shrinking in her seat when he pulled into Cottages on Providence.

“What do you mean?”

“This is a public apartment, Gates, not some hidden cabin out of town!”

“Yeah?” His words were a gesture for her to continue.

“What if an FBI agent were to wonder over here from Cotswold, or the body were to float towards Myers park?”

“No one is wondering over here and even if they do, they don't know you're here. And as for the body, no one knows you got rid of it.” He took a breath. “Look, you're going to have to lower your expectations here. This is real life and not some murder mystery. I don't own some fancy lake house you can disappear to, I own this because it was my sisters before she passed and the rent had been paid for months ahead.” The car lunged to a stop. The shattered scrap of yelling yellow metal Ryan Gates towed, kissed the rear of his car once more. They had to get used to that each time they slowed to a stop. He looked towards the line of semi-dethatched homes that made up Cottages on Providence. “Your instructions here are simple, don't leave and don't open the door for anyone besides Walker and I, got it?”

“What if I run out of food? Or clothes?”

“There are enough clothes to last your stay and as for food, I’ll handle that. Just until we’re done with our investigation into Alexander Hemmings.”

“I only have until Friday next week.” She drummed. She knew what it meant; if they couldn’t find anything she would turn herself in.

“I got that. Now get in there, the second building.” Her brows dipped in a clear frown.

“You’re not coming?” She looked at him.

“There’s a cab hooked onto my cop car drenched in the blood of a murdered cab driver, so if it wasn’t clear, I really can’t welcome you to your new hide out.” Reluctantly, she’d climbed out of the front seat. She hadn’t shut the door, but she’d remained planted to the street next to his car almost awkwardly.

“I’m sorry...” She looked softly at him, just for a moment. “...for throwing up in your car and ultimately getting you involved in this... and thanks... for your help.” She shut the door and turned only to be hauled back with the piercing blare of a sharp horn. She looked at him. “What?” She drew out when it dawned on her that he could wake the neighbours... shit! No one was supposed to know that she was here, god damn it!

“Catch!” He said and tossed her a ring of keys. “It’s the fluffy pink key... don’t ask why.” With a small smile, she nodded and turned again, this time scurrying towards the second building, listening to the grumble of his cop car and the squeak of the cab that once carried a man to his death.

Once shaken to the core by the darkness of the night, Madison Miller was gradually growing too attached to the stealth the night brought. After all her neighbours would be fast asleep by this time of the night... they had to be! They would be unaware of her movements; and in a way, it had its

ups and downs. For one if she needed to roam Charlotte, she was protected by the night. But if she were visited by a trigger happy hooded Hemmings, and tugged away from her hide out, it will as well remain under the noses of her new neighbours that knew nothing of her presence.

Through the door, the thick white front door, sat an empty home, one that when touched with light brought to life the safe space of an elegant woman. Her pictures weren't on the light grey walls, there were no knickknacks on the shelves by the living room television that would have insinuated her presence, but the decor wailed this woman's taste in the finer things. Her home was best described as country meeting city, elegance meeting homey. It was a space that instantly put Madison at ease. The luxury white sofas and arm chairs wailed success while the red and white chequered table cloth hummed a mother's country touch. Madison had been soaking in the interior detailing, wondering just what this poor late woman's story could have been until the dead silence sat with her, bringing her darkest thoughts to the surface. She was a criminal. She was the reason that Latina cab man had died, she'd disrespected his body, dumping it in Briar Creek. She was the reason Ethan was kidnapped, Oh lordie, if only she'd said no when she had the chance.

Through the kitchen, Madison lunged up the stairs to the only room in the cabin, antsy to do anything rather than sit with her regrets. She made a beeline for the bathroom. A bath would help her rampant feelings. She could redirect them to planning something, anything that would get Ethan from Hemmings and exonerate her. With the stuttering tap, filling the tub, Madison peeled off her vomit stained clothes, constantly recalling her last moments with the Latina cab man. He'd had a deep throaty voice, as if he were a smoker who'd quit a little too late. He'd had the patience of a three year old but he'd managed it clearly needing the tip he'd

never gotten. She'd ridden from the airport with a man that as at the time, she'd had no idea he would die. For heaven sakes if she'd known he'd be shot point blank execution style, she would have left him far away from Chiswick road! She might have not fired the bullet into his head, but she'd killed him, she was the reason his family would mourn him, and would grow without him.

At this point, she had no control over the stream of tears that blurred her eyes; she had no control over the thoughts that left her paralyzed in place, merely clutching her naked trembling form as the tub slowly threatened to overflow. If she got through this without prison time, she would go back, the guilt alone for all she'd done, would send her back. She was a wanted suspect, evading the authorities and taking justice into her own hands... who had she become?

. . .

Jeffery Teagan endured the searing pain of a thousand branding rods trade-marking his legs as he huffed and puffed through the long forlorn halls towards his squished corner office—well, it wasn't much of an office more appropriately, a camera room with his name tagged on the door on a chipped cheap gold plate. But it was still his and although his stuck up wife didn't think much of it, he did. And on the topic of his wife, Bethany Teagan; if she would stop giving him hell about his position as the eyes of Cotswold Elementary he wouldn't always be ten minutes late and have to huff and puff through the halls all just to make it to his desk before the principal—another stone in Jeffery's shoes that expects the overnight footage run through before the school doors open.

When Teagan had taken up the job, mere weeks into his marriage with Bethany, it seemed like a breeze, resume two hours early, the walk from the entrance as well didn't seem too far. But when he'd dashed through his savings and hit a

rough patch, paired with both Bethany's high risk pregnancies, it was clear things weren't exactly as gentle a gust as they'd seemed. He'd begun resuming only an hour earlier, and leaving work too early to receive a decent pay. What was worse? With Bethany's last pregnancy rendering her immobile for the span of the weeks running up to her delivery, she'd ditched her job as a cocktail waitress and depended solely on Jeffery Teagan... and that's when the mockery started and he'd begun resuming work fifteen minutes early or much like the present where he was only five minutes early. Dang it!

The squeak of his sneakers slapping the polished tiled floors bonged off the walls, beating along his quaking heart. Upon reaching the crooked chipped gold plate that read 'Jefery Teagan'—okay they'd also misspelled his name, that didn't make the tiny stuffy room any less his—he'd been a sweat drenched mess. Bottom line, he'd made it, and if Principal George Cane wanted to give him a hard time he could always claim he'd already gone through it, there was hardly anything worth reporting that happened during the night.

From prior experience, in Teagan's line of work, he'd seen fights. Often at times, they would be high school kids, teenagers who'd leaped the fences to lounge by Cotswold Elementaries' playground after the sun had been tucked in for the night and the moon came out to play. They hardly wandered any farther than the swings. Teagan hardly perceived their behaviours as enough to involve the police, after a few rounds of throwing fists; the night parole officer Sean Russell would often flash these rascals off. The little scampering scoundrels would dash as if they'd committed a capital offence. Huh, kids!

Slumping onto the single whining wheelie-chair by the wall of monitors, what was left of Bethany's morning Panera

mocha still in his free hand, Jeffery Teagan logged into the systems cameras from the single desktop sat by a crooked old desk and then relayed the night's footage. Nothing in Teagan's training had prepared the chunky glutton for what he'd walked into that morning on Cotswold Elementary's surveillance cameras. Initially, there'd been nothing worth reporting, and sitting there, he'd flipped open his log book and documented what he did every other day, the night had calm and barren of troubling teenagers looking to throw fists, vandalize school property or steal, and neither of the students had wandered over during the evening. After that one kid—Trevor... Rogers? had left his entire bag pack at school and thought sneaking in after hours to get it wouldn't trigger the night guard—Jeffery Teagan had been instructed to look out for wandering children as well as rebellious teenagers.

Jeffery hadn't expected to stumble upon surveillance footage of a couple trudging along the front of the school gate, the limp body of man, a dead man. To begin with, the father of two hadn't thought much into the gut wrenching scene that replayed on the monitor. His morning duties of running over the night's footage were often done with crusty sleep lulled eyes and a heart that wailed from his morning dash against time. But even dazed, something stirred him; it had been the shrilling stillness of the body dragged along by a frenzied woman and a broad dark haired man into the back of a state issued cop car. At that moment he'd felt like time had slowed maybe it had, maybe he'd relayed the videos in slow motion, but he felt like his mind was a failed engine refusing to kick-start. After all, he'd gone into this line of work with the impression that he'd only have to deal with petty crimes of theft, fights and many at times pick-pocketing. Murder wasn't on the list!

"Oh shit!" Jeffery Teagan groaned, blanched as he'd pulled out his old liability flip phone and dialled 9-1-1.

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It had only been days since FBI special agent Spencer Black had been assigned the case of the ten ten-year-old boys, kidnapped and killed, his only suspect a runaway nanny playing along the hoax of a break-in, and it had already begun to feel like a long, exhausting week. Black returned his gaze to Bradley Carter. The man had a lead—No, he had more than just a lead—he had a body; a John Doe, and one heck of a story that further straps this fleeing nanny in her web of federal crimes. If this had been any other situation, he would have waved the woman off as a witness, he'd hardly come across petite women of her nature relishing in crimes of this magnitude; luring ten-year-old boys away from their school with her welcoming features, kidnapping them, torturing them and killing them point blank execution style with a .38 special.

Primarily, Spencer Black had stepped onto the plates with the impression that Madison Miller had acted alone for each plotted kidnap and murder... No, she couldn't have! It didn't add up, especially when Black had been made aware of the calls placed within Charlotte to the police of the whereabouts of each murdered victim. They were all calls made from a frantic male. A man he could bet top dollar she had on gun point, a man that could as well be their John Doe. This was however a theory Bradley Carter had scrunched up and thrown over his shoulder during his in his 9-1-1 call made at the peak of the morning.

"Run me over what it is you saw at the crack of dawn?" Spencer Black slapped the back of his neck as a mosquito landed just above his collar.

"A man and a woman, they were dragging along a body. I know what I saw with ma' two good eyes. Even if I was out for a late night puff, the nicotine never hit me that hard that I'd rustle up the image of a murder cover-up."

"And this woman, can you describe her?" Black eyed the thin line of blood that trailed the dead insect.

"It was dark, ya' know, so I didn't really get a good look at her, but she was small, pale looking and her clothes were filthy... Pretty sure if I'd gotten any closer she'd stink up ma' pipes." Carter creased his nostrils.

"And the man she'd been with?" Spencer acknowledged the washed-out officer that trudged towards him with a determined stride.

"Nah he I'd recognize in a heartbeat. He's been to this area one too many times. At first I'd been like nah, it can't be... but the closer I got to the pair the clearer he was."

Black cleared his throat, his patience wearing thin. "And for records sakes who was this man?"

"Detective Ryan Gates. I've seen his face on too many news networks and rallies around here not to recognize him." Spencer Black cursed. Just once, just loud enough to startle the officer that now stood adjacent to him.

"Daniel Lehman, Detective, Mecklenburg division." The officer introduced. "Think you've got bad news, surveillance at Cotswold Elementary caught a frenzied woman and a broad dark haired man trudging a body into a squad car." rambled.

"When was that called in?"

"Crack of dawn, at about 7:25A.M."

"Got the footage?" Black wiped down the remains of the dead insect on his pant leg.

"Down at Mecklenburg precinct, I.T. is running it through facial recognition." Spencer huffed.

"It's just going to be a confirmation of what our witness here just testified to." He gestured towards Carter who'd had his

wandering eyes fixed on the body they'd trudged from the bottom of Briar Creek nearly half an hour ago. Often at times Spencer didn't condone the wandering eyes of the witness, especially in cases of gruesome murders much like this one.

"Y'all ever figure out his cause of death?" Bradley Carter ran his fingers through his hair. There was a crack in his voice. He was startled, petrified.

"According to forensic pathologist for the Mecklenburg precinct medical examiners department, Xavier Michaels, our John Doe died of a single gun-shot to the head, he did however have some post mortem scars that they are going to further look into once he's brought down to the morgue." Spencer Black narrated almost in a monotone. Spencer turned to Daniel Lehman.

"Get an arrest warrant and get some officers to keep an eye on Gates, that rat bastard is going to lead us straight for our killer."

Chapter Twelve

Her day begun not unlike any other she'd had lately. Madison Miller would have liked to say it had started in the living room of the late exquisite woman, at about 9:23 A.M. when the news was doing a breakfast segment on how to properly pan-fry a golden-brown pancake. If she'd gotten any sleep, perhaps she would have been able to claim that her day had started on a lighter note, more upbeat. Maybe just maybe things would have been a tad different. They weren't, much to her chagrin.

At about 4:36 A.M. Madison heard herself chuckle—more precisely cackle. It was loud, leaping off the walls and windows. She'd once more let in the faded recollections of her night with Ethan before the breaking and entering—she'd remembered his features; innocent and light, she couldn't forget that curious, caring personality that just knew there was something on her mind, or his restless bounding energy that sent him lurching about his home—an image, that just as quickly morphed into that night with Tucker when he'd been taken from her Cotswold home and then just at the corner of the fuzzy picture of her living room all those years ago stood the body of the Latina Cab man—completely out of place in her memories and yet fitting in just right with her fidgety reminiscences. It was at that point, when her eyes had caught the rotting flesh of the Latina Cab man towering over her living room furniture that she'd hooted into the night, well, day. There wasn't anything funny she'd been laughing at, and she'd assumed it had been her brains way of settling into her situation; she was barely over her son's murder and now, she had the life of another woman's son in her hands. And just as suddenly as

the laughing had started, it had stopped. And she'd sat for many minutes in an eerie, piercing silence, thinking instead of who exactly the deceased sister of Ryan Gates had been.

How else would she tug her mind from the shadows it was determined to lurk in?

Had his sister been a measly country girl who'd made one visit to the city that stuck with her? No, there had to be more to the deceased woman.

Rather than sit there in the middle of the dead-woman's living room like a long forgotten throw-pillow on its bare back in the living room floor, Madison poured her ceaseless energy into looking for something. At first she didn't know what she'd been looking for, but she'd searched for it anyway. She'd started with the much-too-skinny-for-her-looking vertical shelves that stood like pillars on either side of the living room television a device she was yet to turn on as the clock continued to glide into a quarter to 5:00 A.M.. Books hit the floor with a thud, flowers in plastic vases rolled about the wooden floors by Madison's feet, unsatisfied, she made a bee-line for the kitchen cabinets and drawers, tugging them open one after another with a subtle grunt. And when that didn't yield anything worth her concern, she darted up the creaky old stairs and up into the wardrobe. At this point, Madison knew what she'd been looking for; anything to paint a vivid picture of whose house she was in. Pictures, letters, a stained dress the exquisite woman had worn to a wine tasting... anything!

When the clock hit 5:28 A.M., Madison had completely thrown the dead-woman's home upside-down, and sat there, admits her mess, heaving. Was that disrespectful to the dead? Rummaging through their home? It didn't matter much to Madison. What did was that she'd learned more about this lady the longer she'd spent shadowing—gusting like a hurricane—through the deceased woman's home. This

woman's family had cleared out her belongings—well, most of them—but much like a house cleaning, there were corners and crannies creased with dirt, in this case, memories.

Madison Miller hadn't stumbled upon a year book or framed picture the late woman's family could have overlooked; dust bunnies like that were definitely cleaned out on sight. No, Madison had come across the little things, like the old broken cigarette shoved into the bathroom windowsill above the toilet—why was it broken? Had she been a veteran smoker? Had she been detoxing when she'd tried to sneak one and overall thrust away the idea... not in the toilet but in the windowsill above the toilet?

Madison couldn't say she'd fallen asleep after her eventful hours of thrashing a late woman's home, whatever had happened, it had been too twitchy to call a nap, especially on the cold damp floor of the bathroom, her back pressed against the tub. It didn't even last longer than a few minutes... it didn't feel like it had. When next she'd come across that chic clock on the living room wall, it was wailing the hour of eight and she'd thrown on nothing but a towel left on the bathroom rack. Now, all she'd wanted was to pretend like she wasn't a suspect for a child kidnap and murder case, that she hadn't submerged the body of a man under Briar Creek, or that she hadn't lost her son all those years ago. She wanted to believe that she was in the home of a friend, Tucker was home with Clive and she was merely on an assignment to cover an unfolding story for the WCCB. Although turning on the television wrenched her rather roughly from her world of make-believe.

"...We remain unsure whether these two people were behind the kidnapping of the other ten-year-old boys, but from Cotswold Elementary's surveillance footage it is clear they're not done with their reign of terror."

With her image juxtaposed with that of Ryan Gates on the screen, Madison felt visibly pale. It was one thing to know the FBI had it out for her; it was another to see her face plastered above the headlines of channel 9 news. It would have stung less if it had just been her picture. It was more, because just as soon as the images had faded from the screen a video popped up, beneath which warned of graphic content. She couldn't hear anything, but she could see herself walk into the camera frame and walk out, and then in again with Ryan, this time clutching the feet of the Latina cab man dragging him towards the rear seats of Ryan's state issued cop-car that was just at the corner of the fuzzy video.

"The police are yet to get their hands on the fleeing double-crossing detective, but one thing's for sure; this is a lead for these murders, if the state's department of justice has seen one!"

Madison was in a frenzy, backing away from the television, almost trembling, until she'd heard a knock at the door, and then she'd stumbled over her own two feet and crashed with a thump on her butt. "Madison open this door!" Grumbled a nameless muffled voice. Oh no! The police! The FBI! They'd found her! Just as easily for that matter. She wasn't a criminal so, she wasn't good at hiding! Her heart ached in her chest, just as if it would kill her at this point before the police did for a crime she didn't commit. "Madison, it's me, Adam. I'm here with Ryan and the police can't catch us outside... please open the door." She'd nodded clinging to the soothing familiarity of Adam Walker's voice. On her knees and palms, she crawled the remaining distance and gripped the door handle with both noodle arms, using it to pull herself upright and onto her feet. Flinging the door open she leaned against the sturdy frame of the wooden door as both men wafted into the cabin home.

He'd noticed her frantic state before Ryan Gates had. Adam who'd darted into the shattered cabin behind a clearly agitated Ryan Gates took a moment to take in the woman that was once a chirpy mother of one. She resembled something out of a horror movie, not scary per say, but unkept, dishevelled; her hair a damp dark curtain, one that fell limp and loose about her face, her eyes rimmed with dark circles and her lean frame barely clothed in a dirty white towel. And for a moment he wanted to hold her and remind her that everything would be fine, it had to be. He hadn't held her. Rather he'd turned his attention to the living room that seemed like there'd been a struggle. "What happened in here?" He asked instead. And when she didn't answer, he returned his gaze to her. There seemed to be a distant stare as a trembling hand of hers rose and her pointer finger had his attention on the morning's breaking news; *Cotswold Elementary releases surveillance footage of murderers transporting the body of a deceased employee?*

. . .

It was funny, although she hadn't laughed, but merely acknowledged the sudden shift in the tone of channel 9 news. The reporters that once wore long, stoic features as they spoke about her, about the video that had surfaced of her disposing a body, all seemed light hearted as they chuckled over who could properly make a golden-brown-pancake. Well, it sure wasn't their golden-boy reporter Chad Mayers, if his slimy yellow blob was anything to show for. Were those the traits she was missing in becoming a good reporter? Being able to switch moods in the snap of a finger? She could try to emulate them... she was once the best reporter the WCCB had seen, back then it was all work, she'd known the daily grind like the back of her hand, up until her scandal bobbed his head out; the same one that hauled her out of work till date. She'd never found who'd started it... she'd liked to look at it as another loose end in her life.

Clearly whoever had sparked the claim that she'd seduced her way up to the lead WCCB reporter clearly hadn't seen hard-work and persistence... it didn't matter now, did it? Because as she sat there in a relative silence, in the presence of Ryan Gates and Adam Walker, she doubted her scandal all those years ago would be of any relevance still lingering at the back of her mind. And as such, she drew her eyes from the screen and focused on the men who seemed a little... off to say the least.

"We need to leave Charlotte..." Gates grumbled, his fist slamming against the chequered-dining-table-cloth. The soft fabric did little to muffle the thump of his fist against wood. She was startled; she hadn't been the only one. Adam it seemed had been withdrawn from his thoughts.

"It's too late to leave Charlotte, Gates, security at the airport and borders are going to be heightened." Adam said. In simple terms; Madison and Ryan were wanted suspects for multiple counts of murder and kidnapping. If she were told mere weeks ago that she would be a wanted face, plastered over multiple news channels, she would have been the last to believe. But isn't this what Hemmings wanted? For her to take the fall? He was already off the hook; they weren't looking in his direction, why couldn't he just return Ethan? Good Lordie! She wished she could get in contact with him... It was never that easy.

"Well then wise-guy, what do we do? Because unlike you, Madison and I could actually go to jail while that mad-man slaughters another innocent boy!" To Madison, that was the worst case-scenario. She wasn't going to let Ethan die. But neither was she going to let Ryan go to jail for assisting her.

"I haven't the slightest darned idea!" Adam blared. "We're at a dead end, Gates. You, Madison and I. And I'm sorry to say this but you both have it worse and I don't have a damn clue what you bunch can do!" That was it? Adam was stumped?

He's the reason things spiralled out of control... right? He'd scolded her for going to the police and now she was sitting on the hot-seat and he was just... stumped?

"We could have gone to the police." Madison whispered. She felt it, the warm, bitter twinge of hot tears simmering beneath her eyelids. "All those days ago, in the beginning."

"Don't you get it? Hemmings would have killed him if we did!" Adam rose to defend his actions, even though he knew the real reason why he didn't want to go to the police in the first place.

"Well he sure knew how to turn the tables, because now, the police is after not just me, but Ryan Gates; your own friend!" Madison blared. There was a knock at the door; it was soft and clearly overlooked by both men. But Madison had her ears pressed to the ground. Her helplessness gave her a heart-burn. Oh heavens! What if the knock at the door was a neighbour that had noticed the light of the late exquisite woman's home? What would she say?

"I get that, I get that loud and clear, Madison. No need to be captain obvious now. But that sure as hell isn't the end of the god-damn line." Adam chimed, nearly suffocated with the guilt that sat atop his chest. He'd flung the woman he'd known since she'd moved in next door at eighteen under the bus along with his former partner in crime and old friend. And for what? Just because he'd wanted to dangle leverage over a body high enough to reinstate him back into the force? Who the hell was this douche-bag? Because he clearly couldn't recognise himself.

"It most definitely feels like it, though you wouldn't know since you somehow get to walk away from this unscathed!" Ryan Gates sprung to his feet. At this point they'd all heard the knock; almost as if it was louder this time, more demanding, rough. That wasn't the knock of a neighbour

who'd seen the lights of the abandoned cabin glaring through the curtain slits.

"FBI, open up!" Madison was sure she'd swallowed her heart; wouldn't that explain why it seemed to stop beating? "We have an arrest warrant for Ryan Gates and Madison Miller. We know you're in here, open up!" Shit-biscuits! What would her Momma think when she found out her darling Madison had reached the end of her rope, long before she'd rescued a frightened helpless Ethan Daniels? This wasn't the plan... what was the plan? She would go away for a long time and Ethan would be released... to who and when? Okay they never really had a plan, but they'd had a goal and clear instructions. Get Ethan Daniels back to a distraught Lauren alive, and for that, Madison was to take the fall and plead guilty for all charges, but Ryan... he'd done nothing more than merely help her trudge the dead-weight of the Latina cab man.

"They can't get Ryan..." Madison mumbled, picking up her phone from where she'd left it on the sofa and handing it to the detective who'd gotten roped into this by lending her a spare hand.

"Hemmings will call when it is confirmed that I have been arrested, he will return Ethan. Take him to his parents. They're dying inside without their little boy. I died everyday that I spent away from Tucker... not knowing whether or not he was safe."

"There's nowhere for me to hide, Miller, they're going to take the both of us, give Adam the phone, he is our only contact with the outside world." Gates grumbled nearly shoving her angrily towards Adam Walker. Although he hadn't exactly touched her, she'd stumbled over her own two feet as if he had. "And Walker, get in touch with Paige Quinn, she's the best lawyer for our case. She'll know what to do." When his former friend wriggled out of his stunned stupor and

nodded, Gates strolled reluctantly towards the front door. He turned to Madison. "This is going to be a lot easier and less messy if we both surrender at the same time... Ready to go to jail?" She wasn't ready to serve a death sentence, she wasn't ready to lose all contact with the outside world, but then she realised that she didn't get to have Tucker returned to her alive. That didn't mean Lauren Daniels deserved the same fate. So, with a heavy breath she nodded.

"Ready."

. . .

Over and over his footsteps clicked and clacked the pristine marbled floors of the Mecklenburg County Detention Center on E 4th St. Had he gotten tired of waiting outside a thick wooden door that didn't seem like it was going to open? Yes. Was he progressively losing his wits with each slow tick of the wall clock by the stairs? Also yes! A part of him, a more than generous part wanted to make like a bat out of hell and ditch this place. For one thing, there was no way to shrug the chill from the strategically placed overhead air-conditioners... or had that been the crisp of dread gradually heaving goosebumps up and down his arms and legs. Adam Walker couldn't seem to shake the feeling that somehow, this was his fault. And in a way, it was. It wouldn't be the first time his blatant neglect for due procedure had cost him. The last time, it had been his eight-year-law-enforcement-career that to this day was yet to recover. This time it would cost him the woman he was stumbling over his two left feet for, and his former partner; a man that he'd once considered a dear friend. Was it worth it; risking both their reputations and probably lives for a sliver of a chance at getting reinstated? He'd hesitated with a response to his own question. He had his answer.

He'd earlier-on spoken to Paige Quinn over the phone, not quite long after Ryan Gates and Madison Miller had been

rather roughly withdrawn from the late Rebecca Gates cottage-on-Providence-home. The private criminal defence attorney seemed hopeful over the outcome of their case and had set off from her busy day onward to join the scatterbrained trio at the Mecklenburg County Detention Center on E 4th St. Walker on the other hand had been initially hesitant to trail the men-in-black-looking-agents on their route to their headquarters. After all, he could only speculate what Rebecca Gates home would look like when he returned. It was safe to say he'd royally fucked up! If it was any consolation, they'd all screwed up, he, Madison and Gates... He'd just screwed up a little more than the rest.

"Ma' hands are tied when it comes to Miss. Miller," Said Paige sashaying gracefully through the halls. On fidgety, fumbling feet, Adam Walker trailed the defence attorney, not quite sure where exactly they were headed. He didn't seem to care too much. He should have. "As for Gates, I can get him off on a lighter sentence by dissociating him from the murders of the ten-ten-year-old boys." A lighter sentence? That was all she could do for him? And how many years did that mean? Five? Twelve? Oh lord!

"What do you mean your hands are tied?" Adam asked, gusting down a flight of stairs, not exactly in pace with the quick-footed attorney. He felt like a wide-eyed-rookie on the damn force clinging onto the words of his superiors. But oh boy did he miss those days! There was always a certain rush that gushed through his veins. What he had as he pursued attorney Quinn felt less like the adrenaline surge from his life on the force and more like an uncomfortable sensation... could it simply be a case of indigestion?

"I mean, she already testified to the murders. All of them, she's in there giving a written confession. At best I can get her a plea-deal; she gives up the eleventh kid and she doesn't get the death sentence." Her words made his

stomach churn. He'd caused this. They could have gone to the police. He'd had his own selfish reservations that held him by the neck. Oh heavens! What had he gone n' done now? "I would have filed for a habeas Corpus, but she's already confessed."

"Gates can claim he'd been coerced into helping her move one of the bodies... neither he or Miller can slither from that one, there's surveillance footage of that and a witness willing to testify." Paige drew to a stop by the reception. Her plan was to completely throw Madison Miller under the bus? There had to be more to it.

"You've gotta' have something else Quinn. There's gotta' be anything we can do?" Adam Walker felt helpless and sick to his stomach. It wasn't indigestion, he knew that now. It was good old fashion regret.

"You can go in there and talk to your friends. They need someone right now, as for me, I'm going to file this case and see what I can gather precedence wise. There's a storm coming and boy do we gotta' be ready for it." Paige Quinn said with a nod. Feeble, Walker could do nothing but watch as she turned on her stiletto-heels and sauntered out the translucent doors. For the love of God!

Running a hand through his hair, Walker retraced his steps to where he'd been told to wait outside for a seemingly useless Paige Quinn to further bury them in their own shit. *She was helping*, a fraction of him liked to think. But sincerely, was she? He'd gotten her involved and the best she could do was a life sentence for Madison and a reduced sentence for Gates if he completely denied Madison? His breaths had been restricted to short forced puffs as he pounded up the flight of stairs... had they taken a left turn or right turn by the water cooler? His situation had left him slaphappy.

"Excuse me, authorised personnel only." Blared a voice. Walker whipped around, paused in his stride, his hands shoved into his pockets.

"I'm here to talk with Detective Gates." Walker squared up to the officer by the door... unless he'd taken the wrong turn and this wasn't where Gates was held. Wouldn't that be incredibly disconcerting? He knew he shouldn't have taken a left by the cooler!

"Authorised personnel only." The man repeated. From where Adam stood the man almost seemed animated with his pudgy stomach and dark rimmed glasses.

"I'm here with his lawyer, Paige Quinn and I need to see him." At this the man seemed even more uninterested, if that were possible.

"Look sir, I'm going to have to ask you to leave the premises as you are beginning to consist a nuisance to the corporate body that is the Federal Bureau of Investigation."

"He's my friend and he could be charged for a crime he didn't commit." Adam continued, flaring his hands in unreserved frustration. Was this it; had he completely gone bat-shit-crazy? Had he absolutely lost control of the situation? Their neighbour's son was gone. Protests ran rampant through the streets outside Cotswold that may or may not be looking at a month long shut down as nation-wide parents and kids' alike sought justice for the ten-ten-year-old boys kidnapped and killed by Hemmings. And now, Madison Miller could be facing life in prison at best and Gates, it was clear he couldn't walk out of this without a sentence.

Goddamnit!

. . .

“Alexander Hemmings?” Spencer Black echoed. In his office, the special ops agent seemed squirmy. It didn’t help that he was in a bit of a sticky-wicket with this case. He couldn’t exactly say he’d been prepared to take the brief, it had just sort of landed in his lap and boy was he going to get a big bonus if he could crack this one. Think about the rounds of moonshine he could offer his boys at the downtown bar up yonder.

“Yes. Apparently both of their stories seem to involve the name Alexander Hemmings.” Officer Charlie Wallace explained. The interrogating officer had been of the pleasure of sitting with the detained suspects Madison Miller and former detective Ryan Gates because Wallace could bet all his darn here gold pennies that Gates wasn’t going back to the force. “Although their stories differed, they both involved the same man. Alexander Hemmings and they both believe he’s with the eleventh kid.”

Spencer Black leaned back in his seat, his face hardened. If this Hemmings guy was with the eleventh kid, there could still be a murder. *Shit!* This was still a race against time, with the life of a ten-year-old on the line. “And what did they have to say about this Hemmings person?”

“In Miss. Miller’s case, she was a bit stubborn to cooperate. She did say that she was the mind behind the crimes, but she had the boy with a friend. Took a lot of time and persuasion, but she finally budged with the name Alexander Hemmings. As for Gates, he had very little to say on the matter and just told us to investigate the name Alexander Hemmings.”

“And is there anyone looking into this third party?” Spencer Black was more than troubled by the situation. If there was indeed a third-party, he would need to convince yet another judge to grant an arrest warrant and he doubted he could find another willing one within the city of Charlotte. He

hadn't even thought of how much more he would need to plunge into a full fledged investigation of this Hemmings person.

"At the moment, no... And it's not for the reason you're thinking." Officer Wallace leaned forward in his seat, his hands pressed downward, fingers sprawled against Spencer Blacks' wooden desk. "It's because there was a little more we were able to get out of Miss. Miller. She said Hemmings is under special orders to release the boy in twenty-four hours if he's not investigated or kill him if he is."

"And you birdbrains are listening to the claims of a serial-killer? We have the upper hand here! We can trap him like a little rat and grab the boy." Spencer was startled to hear his fellow officer speak this way. This was all wrong, all of it. Wallace should have gotten someone looking into Alexander Hemmings, following the deranged nutcase. To Spencer, anyone that worked for a woman conniving enough to plan, kidnap and murder ten innocent ten-year-old boys was a lunatic and deserved the highest punishment.

"What if we look into him and he kills the boy? We've got to play our cards right, Spencer." Argued Wallace. Here's the thing, Spencer wasn't brick-headed. He'd looked at things from Wallace's perspective... Okay he exactly hadn't, but he wasn't exactly closed to the idea. If they cornered Hemmings, he could kill the boy and if they didn't he could flee their jurisdiction.

"Twenty-four-hours?" Black asked again. "That's all she gets, if the boy isn't released we're cornering that rat bastard and getting back that boy."

. . .

Chapter Thirteen

If there was anywhere Alexander Hemmings would have liked to be, it would have been in Maryland and not in Harris Houston Road, still in Charlotte with a boy he now wanted nothing to do with. A boy he couldn't bring himself to kill. Wouldn't that shatter the entire purpose? He'd committed each murder for Ethan Daniels, for his inner ten-year-old-self that he saw in Ethan Daniels. Killing Ethan would be like killing his inner ten-year-old; a boy that was a tad different, but more than anything just wanted to fit-in and not play the classic 'let's see how much playground sand the recess freak could fit in his mouth'. *He wasn't a freak!* And all he'd wanted was to get through fifth grade damn it!

But as he sat there, his heart aching in his chest and left leg restlessly tapping on the egg-white tiled floors of the much too disconcerting waiting area of the brightly colored blue and yellow room, adjacent to a man that seemed all too familiar in the nastiest ways, he couldn't help but feel like things had taken a turn for the worst. He broke the silence with a chuckle; he didn't particularly know what he was doing. The situation to him was about as clear as an overcast night. The head of the man adjacent to him rose like an ostrich out of the sand. His stomach sunk. It was him. And all of a sudden something shimmered beyond the overcast night. And this might have all been in Hemmings head, but it seemed to guide him towards a certain thing he had to do.

If it was any consolation, age had not been pleasant to the schools heartthrob. Once the reason Cotswold Elementary's fifth grade girls would linger behind in class and try to sneak a conversation with the Cotswold sweetheart, it seemed with time, he'd become the headliner for balding middle-aged

men in his ripe twenties. Hemmings wasn't any better in the hair department, but his was a strategic choice for his... lifestyle.

How was it possible that after years of trolling the internet, years of rummaging through the records, he hadn't been able to come across even just one of the men that had altered his perspective on life and the day he'd reserved to getting his passport picked up, he'd stumbled into Bert Lance; the same Bert Lance that had shoved him into the classroom doors and tugged away his seat right when Hemmings was about to sit. Once or twice would have been a hoot, but every chance he got was a bit much.

The fact that the man could sit at ease by Hemmings riled his blood-pressure. Hemmings had single-handedly sent fear streaking through the streets of Charlotte! If Bert knew what was what, he would be trembling in Hemmings wake. Was this a sign that there was more he had to do in Charlotte before taking his leave? It had to be.

His fingers trembled. He knew this feeling, the weight on his chest, the almost empty-hollowness of his thoughts. This wasn't the place, neither was it the time, but Bert Lance had to die and Hemmings would be damned if he thought he could fight the urge that tugged on his fingers to reach for his .38 special. No, he had to be different this time. Those murders were a pattern reserved for Ethan Daniel's bullies. These were his bullies and he was going to ensure they got a little bit of a more... grotesque murder. The kind where Hemmings would watch as their bodies gradually drained of blood; drop after drop and then he would bathe their corpses in the ruby pool.

"Quite the wait, huh?" Hemmings asked. "I got better service at Travel Visa Pro down by McCullough. You here for a pick up?"

“From the way you sound, I would think you’d wanna pick *me* up. Listen, Buddy, don’t take this the wrong way, or, do, I don’t really care. But don’t talk to me.” Hemmings features hardened. His head dropped, his fingers picking at a scab wound on his wrist. Fuck special deaths, Lance needed to die and Hemmings was going to enjoy hearing the piece of shit beg for his last breath.

Despite the possessive insistence of the voice in his head beckoning him to tug out his .38 special, Hemmings remained rooted in place. And he’d sat there even after the honey-blonde receptionist had called for Mr. Lance. In a sense, Hemmings was overflowing with pride, there had only been a handful of times he’d been able to ignore the voice in his head. Was he actually ignoring it? Or was he postponing his impulsive reaction to the requests of the dominating voice? He was inclined to believe the latter.

Though after ‘Mr. Lance’ had stepped out into the glare of the afternoon sun, through the translucent doors, Hemmings had risen from his seat; left, then right, he’d cracked his neck and reached a hand beneath his shirt to his belt buckle where he’d had his loyal weapon. Initially, he’d trailed his former classmate at a distance. But when he’d unlocked his car, Hemmings dashed into action slipping into the front seat of Bert Lance’s Mitsubishi-Eclips-Cross. “What the fuck, Man?” Blared a startled Bert as he turned to meet the barrel of Hemmings .38 special. “If this is about what I said, I didn’t mean it, I was just having a bad day and I lashed out at you.” Hemmings chuckled.

“You always seem to be having a bad day don’t you? I guess everyday back in elementary school you were having a bad day too? I mean why else would you take pains to making me seem like the class freak?” Hemmings was itching to pull the trigger. He wanted more than anything to stain the car with Bert Lance’s blood, but he knew, first came Bert then

came the others. He would get to kill Bert, in due time. But he needed to know where the others were. They ought to have kept in touch. Bert could know one and one, could know two others. Certainly Hemmings was going to bring them down like flies.

"Shit, you still hung up on that? Look I'm sorry! I was a kid, I've changed now, I have a family." There was a twitch in Bert's eyes. Hemmings was a calculated person, he couldn't miss this. His former classmate was looking for a way out. In a taunting manner, Hemmings gradually cocked the weapon, releasing the safety.

"How many kids?" Alexander Hemmings asked.

"What?" Bert's eyes continued to twitch. Did this man not fear the barrel of a loaded gun?

"I said how many kids you got?" Hemmings pressed it further onto Bert Lance's head.

"Two." Hemmings smiled. It wasn't a toothy grin, but a small smile.

"I'm going to make you bathe in the blood of your children." There was blankness in Hemmings stare, and an uncomfortable shrill to his words. It was then that Bert Lance knew he was waist-deep in shit. "But first, drive." This man was crazy as a loon! Thought a prickly Bert Lance. If this man believed that he would drive him to kidnap his own kids, kill them and bathe in their blood, he was mistaken. If he put that car in drive he was heading for the police department on Concord Mills. And if he died along the way, at least he wouldn't get to his kids...

"You're behind them murders aren't you? You sick bastard! You've been killing those children haven't you?" Bert Lance had only been spit-balling, although a piece of him was prone to believing with the current state of the nation, that this man whatever his name was, could be behind the

murders of the ten-Cotswold-elementary-ten-year-old-boys. Hemmings smile was yet to fade, and with it came a throaty laugh.

“It’s not everyday people figure that out so quickly. You’re a smart one; I’m definitely going to enjoy killing you.” Bert glanced at his car horn. “Blare the horn, Bert, I dare you. Let’s keep in mind you have a very modern car with your home location bookmarked into your GPS. My gun has a silencer, I can kill you, shove you into the front seat and drive to your home and dump your body in front of your kids.”

“What is with you and kids?” Hemmings shrugged.

“I guess I never grew up.” Hemmings pushed the start up button for the car. It hummed to life. “Now don’t make me repeat ma’ self. Drive. We’re going to go to a new place and you’re going to parent a new kid... at least until I get tired of you and kill you.”

Hemmings had a plan one he was just itching to play out. Forget sexual fantasies, he had murder fantasies to relish in the day he brought those boys, these men, Bert, Ricky, Ernie and the likes to their knees pleading as he force-fed them playground sand until their eyes burned and he would make them wash it down with toilet water as their own kids watched from the corner... or maybe he would murder their kids, point blank execution style and he would make each of them watch. He ought to have enough room in Momma Hemmings old home to house ten grown men and multiple children.

Fuck-biscuits! What was he going to do with Ethan Daniels?

...

As at the time Madison Miller’s phone blared with what seemed to be the last call the slick-device would receive from Alexander Hemmings, it had been in Adam Walker’s

custody and it had been pitch black outside, the night standing as an inky canopy freckled with the fewest stars. He'd been taking a leisurely stroll through Hartness Avenue. At the time, he'd been relishing in the soft, cool breeze, he'd had his head in the clouds. With the day he'd had, it would be out of the ordinary for his mind to be as calm as a meadow field. The sharp tunes had startled him; pierced through his concerns. The night wasn't particularly quiet, there were cars whooshing past here and there and fellow pedestrians roaming the streets, but he hadn't been expecting the skin-prickling sound or the trembling vibrations in his back pocket. He'd picked up the dancing phone and pressed it to his ear, he'd said nothing, but merely listened.

"Both suspects behind the murder of the ten-ten-year-old Cotswold Elementary boys have been apprehended." Alexander Hemmings quoted the evenings headlines. He hadn't been in the comfort of his own home when he'd trudged up the basement stairs to the headlines hung in a bold red banner beneath a reporter's grim features. No, he'd been in his dear late Momma's house doing away with—as he'd explained to a curious Ethan Daniels—the big bad man. "I didn't think she would do it," He coughed a laugh to himself. For a girl who'd run lily-livered to the police after his first official call, he'd had his reservations about her turning herself in for Ethan. He wasn't even her son! This was rich! "I do wish she could come to the phone; at least to hear the bad-news directly from the source..." He trailed off. Adam could hear footsteps in the background, one quickly accompanied by a muffled grunt. What the hell? "That would defeat the purpose of her going down for my...*her* crimes."

"What do you need her to know, I'll pass the message along." Adam grumbled behind clenched teeth. Perched in place his eyes trailed the gradually flowing traffic of cars. He

was tempted, to just let his eyes flutter shut and for a moment return to a simpler time, to a time with Sarah Walker and his ebbed crush on Madison Miller. A time without kidnapped children, a time without murderers making snide comments into the phone.

"Hmm... What do I need her to know? You know, now that you mentioned it, I don't think she's been made aware of the change in our... *Original* arrangement. Ethan Daniels will no longer be returned a day after she turns herself in. He will however be returned alive and all in good time. He is still quite an asset to me."

"Can we talk about this, please, she's already getting charged with a life sentence." Adam pleaded. He knew pleading with someone as mad as a hatter was futile, and yet he'd tried because he'd do anything to not feel enormously powerless. Physically he'd been drained from the events that shadowed his bumpy extraction from the Mecklenburg County Detention Center on E 4th St. Run well-dry on ideas as to how to get in contact with Ryan or Madison in the absence of Paige Quinn as a go-between, Adam had set off the way he'd come. It wasn't like they were going to let him back in after his rather unpleasant outburst. He'd returned to the late Rebecca Gates cottage-on-providence-home, or at least what was left of it from the combined thrashing of Madison Miller and the men-in-black-looking-agents. At the time the cloudiness of the night seemed to chase him. He'd done what he could here and there; picking up flung clothes and straightening out the bedding. And where he couldn't effectively organize, he'd involved the assistance of Bethany Gates, Ryan Gates aunt.

"As she should, she's been a very bad girl; kidnapping those children, torturing them and listening to their helpless scream as she tugged on the loose trigger. And with a bang, a bullet hole was formed. Point blank execution style." Adam

Walker's features hardened. Did this sick-bastard derive pleasure from this? These were people's children, they loved these children but this man just had to play *God* and determine who lives and who dies.

"Come on now, Hemmings?" Adam tried again, his voice soft.

"I seem to be running into very smart people lately. Interesting that you've figured out my identity before the authorities could. What gave it away, my voice? The good-ol' charisma of a small-town boy with big dreams? Though I'm tempted to add, this doesn't win you any bonus points. Ethan Daniels remains with me until further notice." There was a sense of finality in Hemmings tone that resonated before the line went dead.

No, no, no, no, no! Madison Miller had already made a full confession, she'd written a statement, and she hadn't exactly been under direct duress to make that statement. For heaven's sake, could they get a breather? He hadn't broken the news to her, but he could just imagine how her face would fall, her heart would wrench and she would shrivel up into a shell of her former self.

For heaven's sakes he wanted a goddamn end to it, every damn thing.

. . .

"Tucker Miller," Charlie Wallace slapped a folder onto the single steel table that sat in the middle of the room; that sat between him and Madison Miller. "Murdered at age ten; the poor thing." He'd watched her with the precision of a lurking predator. From where he'd perched at the other end of the table, he didn't know what to think of the woman before him. But then again, it wasn't his job to profile his suspects, now was it? *No*, the interrogating federal officer thought to himself, *it wasn't his place*. And so, he'd blinked the

thoughts aside. He couldn't rip his blazing stare from hers, only, she wasn't looking at him. With sunken empty eyes of sapphire, she'd stared, leisurely at what seemed to be the first picture of her son she'd seen in a while. *Because,* thought Wallace, *why else would her eyes glint with a rising pond of tears?* However, he wasn't sure whether or not this *pond* was crocodile infested. "Kidnapped from his bedroom in the dead of the night. Found dead three days later." He leaned further, a hand shoved into his pants pocket and the other sprawled; his lean and long fingers pressed softly over the file. "Mind telling me a bit of how that made you feel, Miss. Miller?"

Madison Miller had heard his question. She'd mulled over it, for a minute or two, and in her stomach, a laugh gurgled, one she'd easily suppressed. *He wanted to know how her sons kidnap from her Cotswold home made her feel?* She could say her world had collapsed, but that would be a lie. It hadn't, it continued on despite her predicament. Minutes twirled to hours and days. She'd become a burden on a bureaucratic system that in a sense killed her son. But she'd long outgrown casting blames. The question still sat there, at the back of her mind; *what if they'd just started the search a little bit earlier?* As for Tucker Miller's murder, she'd learned it was best described as floating on her back in the middle of the ocean. Occasionally, she would feel the lean dread laced fingers of loss and grief wrap around her ankles. It didn't stop there, it never did, because they would tug her sharp and fast down under. But this time, the ocean water was her memories of her son; their time together. She wouldn't drown in it like a part of her hoped. No, because as quickly as she's tugged down under, she's released and pushed to surface; once more floating on her back in the middle of the ocean.

"No." *It was okay,* Charlie Wallace motioned. Her hesitance was expected, but clearly unwelcome.

They couldn't even get a recent picture. A disgruntled Madison Miller deliberated. It shouldn't have worried her, but it did. *With ample resources at their disposal, this is all they could get their hands on to stamp his file?* She was wedged, with a whispering voice wondering why a chunk of her concerns dallied on a bad picture of her son when she'd just recently signed away her freedom, most likely her life in a false statement. It was simple really; she knew how much he'd hated the pimples and spots on his face before their dermatologist visit in the spring. She doubted these officers knew that. They'd gone for a picture that showed his face, they'd overlooked other pictures where the lightness of his glimmering heart shone through that toothy-grin of his.

"Okay. How about I take a guess?" Charlie Wallace pulled away pacing the tinie-tiney barely-lit interrogation room. He stopped at the other side of the table, cleared his throat and returned his attention to the person-of-interest in the kidnapping of Ethan Daniels as well as the murder of the ten other ten-year-old boys that were snatched from Cotswold Elementary. "I think it made you feel broken, lost. You didn't know what to do with your pain." Maybe it had been a trick of light, or his eyes—his ophthalmologist did always beg him to return for a check-up—but he'd thought he'd seen her clench her jaw. Was he getting to her? Tugging down her walls one by one? "I think you never properly grieved your son. He was after all just a little boy, and little boys don't just die. Mothers shouldn't have to bury their kids. I think you wanted someone else to feel your pain; you wanted mothers in Charlotte to feel your pain."

"No!" Madison echoed. "Clive Greene had something to do with Tucker's murder. Not me, I loved my son. He was my son!"

"Blame the step-father; classic." Wallace responded, his voice tinged with dry amusement. "Well then, Miss. Miller,

care to explain why you never took the case up with a credible attorney?"

"We got a divorce." She hadn't once over looked the cold sharp feeling that bit into her wrist. It was the silver bracelets they'd forced on her, that kept her bound to the table in the middle of the room.

She'd had a feeling once. It was one of those itinerant thoughts roused by the ache of Tucker Miller's passing. She'd remembered it like it was yesterday; Clive hadn't been home. He'd hardly been around much at the time what with his business trips to Mississippi. To a young Madison Miller, he'd been sourcing for his daily-bread, their daily bread. Sleep was but a taunting memory to a grieving mother; to Madison. And she'd pointed a finger at everyone including her own mother. During this period, everyone around her was a potential killer and all she'd wanted was to know who. And Clive, he'd seemed like the perfect suspect. Certainly, she'd never said it out loud, or thought much of it with the slow-dulling pang of her loss. Why would she, he had in the beginning taken her son in as his own, why would he turn around and kill him? It was clear from what Adam Walker had dug up on Clive Greene's involvement with Tucker Miller's passing, her intuition was hardly ever wrong.

"You wanna' know what else I think?" Wallace pressed on. "About why you killed those boys that is; I think you picked up those boys because you couldn't stop wondering what those men had felt putting you through your sons murder. So, ten boys, it made sense. Tucker was ten when he was taken." Wallace tugged the file away from her. At this, she'd looked up at him, knocked for six. "You weren't just content with torturing the boys, you sick bitch, so you shot 'em too."

"No!" Madison rose to her feet, well, tried to. She'd been tugged back down by the shackles that sent a blistering twinge through her wrist. The sudden explosion of clicking

and clacking metal simmered down after a minute or two, and both were encased in a silence as cold as her wristlets. She couldn't attack him, he knew this, that didn't mean he hadn't been startled enough to reach for his weapon. He had, although he was yet to tug it out from his belt.

"And why Ethan?" Wallace wanted to know. He straightened, rather adjusting the hem of his blazer. "Those ten boys weren't enough? You wanted a grand murder, to recreate Tucker's murder?"

"I would never hurt a child!"

"Then tell me the why the hell your plans to release Ethan Daniels have gone South? Still got your guy on the outside taking orders from you?" Wallace barked, eyes bulging. She seemed taken aback by his outburst, frightened even. He winced. His therapist wasn't going to be too happy with this week's feedback. Well neither would Spencer Black. For Pete's sakes, Black had warned him! He filled his lungs with air and slumped into the only other seat in the room. It groaned beneath his weight.

His anger, at the situation, at her, ebbed to a gradual nothingness and soon both were cocooned in a calm before Madison had said; "I lied." She seemed to force it, her words through her teeth. He was tugged from his burdened thoughts. She was still yet to meet his glare. She couldn't seem to tear her eyes from her hands beneath the table, one cuffed to keep her in place and another resting tauntingly free on her lap.

"What do you mean you lied? Lied about what exactly?" Wallace swallowed, hard; there still remained a certain tightness in his chest. "He was never releasing the boy was he?" What if this lead, this Alexander Hemmings character she'd painted was a mere hoax? An innocent man she'd stumbled upon and decided in that cunning and calculated mind of hers to pin her heinous murders on. He wouldn't be

the first guiltless city-dweller she'd ensnared into her criminal web.

Madison Miller huffed. "He didn't keep his word, and neither should I." She mumbled, gradually running her tongue over her bottom lip. *Just how crazy was this woman?* Wallace thought to himself. He without a doubt would bring in psychologist Daniel Moor if this woman continued in this conduct. At least Spencer Black would pardon his slip up if he could prove she'd been loony enough to manipulate him. "My statement, my confession; it was a lie. A cover-up." Charlie Wallace groaned. He had his answer, she was all sorts of messed up in the head. She'd been under no direct influence to alter her statement; her official statement. And now, she wanted him to believe what exactly?

Madison released a melancholic sigh. She'd had a tête-à-tête with Paige Quinn earlier in the day. She'd been stirred to a thrilling wake with Adam Walker's presence in tow. Dancing on the topic of a slumber, she hadn't gotten a wink of it. But when she'd spotted that familiar warm face of his, it had felt like there'd been a flare in her brain... the good kind, and she'd been awoken, yearning to listen to the heart-warming reunion of a lost son and shattered mother. She'd been agonizingly disappointed. They'd rather brought to her comprehension that there wasn't much that could be done in regards to her case. She was fine with that. She'd found comfort in the breast of Ethan's return. Alone in her holding cell perfumed with the stench of her own urine, she'd casted herself as Lauren Daniels joined once more with her son, and in a way, it had given her a sense of reassurance with her decision.

"A cover-up for what?" He could feel it, his patience wearing thin. But he'd made enough progress with therapy, with his temper. He could get through this.

“Who.” She corrected. “Alexander Hemmings. He’s been calling me, since the night of the break-in at the Daniels Cotswold home.”

“Calling to say what exactly?”

“To threaten me,” Wallace didn’t know what to make of his decision to see this woman. He’d already gotten a statement, that was all he’d needed, and yet, he’d found himself back in the tiney-tiny interrogation room with her; almost trying to make sense of things. In her voice, he’d heard genuine fear, but in her actions, he saw a cold-blooded child killer and, it wouldn’t be the first time one of those had tried shedding a few empty tears to escape a death sentence. “Make me do things that I didn’t want to do, just so he could return Ethan.”

“Why didn’t you report the calls?” He tossed open the file.

“I did. When they’d first started. And then, he found out and... I stopped going to the police.” Wallace was on the fence, he had his feet dangling on either side, because he’d been briefed of her report with Concord Mills. She wasn’t lying, at least about this.

“You said he’d threatened you to do things, what kind of... er’ things?”

“Lie, get rid of a body.”

“Tell me more about the body?” He asked referring to the late Pedro Sanchez they’d tugged from Briar Creek. She chuckled.

“Collateral damage. I wanted proof that Ethan was unharmed and that man, that innocent cab man just happened to take me there and Hemmings shot him.”

“And I’m just supposed to believe you?” He’d done that once and he’d found himself back at square one with a helpless child still at large.

“I’m not asking for you to believe me. I made a statement that’s probably going to keep me in here till the day I die. I don’t care about that because I did it with the hope that it would help a poor frightened Ethan Daniels.”

“But it didn’t help him.” Charlie Wallace clarified.

“So it seems.” Madison leaned forward in her seat, her eyes latched to his. “It’s all up to your team, Officer Wallace. I no longer have contact with Hemmings, with Ethan.”

. . .

Chapter Fourteen

The music thumped loud, just enough to make Spencer Black's skin tingle. It was the music, and not whatever child's play the girls he'd hired for the night were doing. He'd long lost the lustre of coiling up in a private booth, sniffing up whatever white-powder the girls had tucked up in their little panties and running back to the night he'd caught his wife of three-years in bed with his colleague. He'd remembered that night too many times to count. And with each slow grind of a nameless barely-clothed girl on his hard crotch, he was back there; at the door to his room, red in the face with a rage that burned from the inside out. Janice Black sat up scarcely covered up by their silk sheets. "It's not what it looks like, Spencer." She'd stuttered his name. At that moment, he'd looked at the woman that once made his heart bulge with affection, and he saw a stranger. A Janice Black he didn't want to recognize.

"Then please, my love, tell me, what it looks like because I sure as hell don't want to believe what I'm seeing." And then, he saw him. Charlie Wallace.

"I knew I'd find you here." Spencer's eyes fluttered open and despite the odd lighting in the room, he recognized the famer-turned-officer physique of his colleague from too long ago. They'd moved past that night, the night Wallace had shattered his trust, but that didn't mean Spencer didn't return there, to stir an ache in his own chest. "Change of plans. The boy isn't being returned as Miss. Miller had us believe."

"You idiot!" Spencer barked, loudly. One of the two girls he'd booked for the night stared startled at him. "What er' you

looking at sweet cheeks? Get your girlfriend here and ya'll take five." Spencer tucked a clean hundred dollar bill into the c-cup of her neon-green bra. His eyes trailed her fluttering behind as she and her partner sauntered through the red velvet curtains and out of the private room he'd reserved for the night. "I told yer that chick was scheming something. I've learned well enough to never trust your back-stabbing ass."

"It's not what it looks like."

"I've heard that one before." Spencer reached for a cigar on the table by his foot.

"Went back to speak with her and she has me believing Hemmings could be working alone."

"Again with this Hemmings person. Your tiny brain is aware she could be pinning her crimes on the poor man right?" He produced a lighter from his pocket and sparked the thick cigar to life. He inhaled the grey scent, a scent that foretold tar-infested lungs.

"I thought of that, but then I got a visit from another person pinning these murders on Hemmings."

"Who?" Spencer relished in the warm burn of a smoke. It had been too long since he'd lavished in this feeling.

"An Adam Walker." Spencer had heard that name before. Racking his brain, it didn't take too long to produce the morning he'd ransacked Miss. Miller's Cotswold home. He knew the name Adam Walker; her neighbour, Officer Walker. How could he forget, he'd left that man's home with an anger that seethed. "And I did some digging into him from that morning at his home; he is a former officer, not an officer."

"Impersonating an officer is a punishable offence,"

“We’ve got no actual proof he impersonated an officer. But I do have men looking into him.”

“You could pour men into looking into him, but you could do nothing in regards to the name that’s been popping up too much with this case, huh?” With each drag from that thick cigar, there was a rotten look in Spencer’s eyes. “What’d your men find on him so far?”

“I also have men looking into Alexander Hemmings, well, they did a background search. We need a higher approval for the resources we’re going to invest into carrying out an investigation into him.” Wallace explained. “Walker was stripped of his badge, something about overlooking due process.”

“Higher resources like Chief of police?”

“Exactly.” Wallace beamed. He leaned back in his seat, his eyes fixed on the red velvet curtains almost as if he’d wanted his own opportunity with the girls that Black had sent on their way. Wallace wasn’t a man that often found himself in a strip-club, but he was after all a man, a single one at that.

“What did yer background check dig up?”

“Huh?”

“You little horny bastard! What did your background check on Hemmings dig up?”

“Oh, er... he works as a janitor at Concord Mills, lives downtown with a roommate Peter Miles, and was last seen at the USPS where many pedestrians have claimed he’d kidnapped a middle-aged man.”

“Why didn’t anyone report it?” Spencer frowned, pulling the cigar from his lips and letting it burn between his pointer and middle finger.

“The kidnapping or the missing person?”

“Both.”

“There’s record of the missing persons report, but nothing on the kidnapping.”

“And this is where yer’ incompetent people need more resources, huh?” Spencer returned the cigar to his lips and took in a long bitter drag.

“Affirmative.” Wallace glimpsed at the table covered with a white powder. His shoulder’s fell. He’d thought Spencer had been getting better, he was wrong, and the guilt nibbled on him because, he’d caused it.

“I’ll get in touch with the chief of police. See if I can move some funds around. But I don’t know how a middle aged man’s kidnapping has anything to do with the numerous murders that has burdened this city.”

“I have a feeling we’ll find the connection.” Wallace assured.

. . .

Alexander Hemmings gazed into the night, agitated and anxious. And concerned; though not about the gradually decomposing body in late Momma Hemming’s Cotswold home, or the newly acquired information he’d beat out of a now dead Bert Lance. It was ten minutes to midnight and he’d stood there in the soft breeze, his hands shoved into his jacket pockets with the grasp that his apprehension bordered on just how much of his ‘conversation’ with Bert Lance Ethan had heard from the first floor living room.

As at the time he’d shuffled down those creaky, lonely basement stairs and into the darkness he’d dumped Bert, Ethan had been occupied with some kids show. Hemmings hadn’t bothered with the name of this one. But it wasn’t the young boys’ favourite Peppa Pig cartoon. All the better, with his concentration set on some chirpy colourful cartoon, much of Hemmings ‘activities’ would go unnoticed... at least

that was what he'd hoped. Bert wasn't exactly the most quiet person he'd had to work with but then again, Hemmings had always worked alone in the past, easily overlooking the volume of their cries and pleas. *Imagine how much Bert's blubbing had traumatized Ethan?* Hemmings huffed, kicking aside a pebble by his foot. Ethan had been preoccupied. He hadn't heard a bit of what had happened in the basement. Hemmings hoped this was the case. And that it wasn't like his childhood where his father would abandon his mother in that very basement, listening to the music of her cries. This was different. *How so?* A voice asked. He dreaded how realistic the voices in his head seemed at times. How much they concentrated and scrutinized his actions and thoughts. *How was it different?* The voice pressed on. He'd had a reason to keep Bert and those children in there. He'd had a reason to bump holes into each one of their fragile skulls. But that was off point, Ethan hadn't heard anything, and in the case of Hemmings childhood? He'd heard only what his father wanted him to hear and his father wanted him to hear late Momma Hemmings' feeble cries.

Hemmings looked to heavens and in the serenade of the night; the stars were a guiding choir. He'd learned from Bert before the poor man's unfortunate demise at the barrel of Hemmings .38 special, that his former classmate had kept in touch with Ricky Fisher after they'd both worked on set of the WCCB. He'd also learned interestingly, that both men had handled a job not much different than the 'activities' Hemmings had carried out in late Momma Hemmings basement with regards to the ten ten-year-old boys that had made Ethan Daniels life a living hell. Though those weren't the words the young boy had used to describe it. "Difficult." Ethan had corrected him over an evening meal.

"Either way," Hemmings had brushed off the young boys manners. "I took care of them for you." There'd been a

pause, and a subtle tremble in the young boys' hands. He'd tried to play it off with a dry laugh and that smile Hemming's had noticed Ethan used to deflect uncomfortable situations.

"Are you gonna'... take care of me?" He'd asked the question while ripping a slice of bread with his teeth.

"No." Hemmings remembered saying. He wished the young boy believed him.

Alexander Hemmings had as well learned from his time in late Momma Hemmings basement that both Bert and Ricky had carried out the murder of a ten-year-old Tucker Miller on a job organized by a Clive Greene. Bert had quite a lot to say on that topic. He'd claimed Clive had paid them a chunk of money to get rid of his wifes' son. They'd broken into the young woman's Cotswold home in the early evening and taken the boy hostage in Fisher's own home and the following day strangled him to death. On the third day, they'd dumped his body for the authorities to stumble upon and they were never caught, suspected or charged for their crime. Hemmings almost found it amusing how much Bert Lance had been willing to divulge when he'd looked into the eyes of death.

To be honest, Hemmings didn't really have much of a plan to get his hands on Ricky Fisher. Then again, he'd never had a plan to get his hands on Bert Lance either. And boy had he felt some sort of emotional cum at the sharp ringing of his .38 special knowing the single sleek bullet had rippled through the forehead of the Bert Lance from all those years ago.

However, Alexander Hemmings had also gotten from Bert that Fisher lived on Providence by Fielding Avenue. He'd been much too impatient to get the house number.

Hemmings knew this was just the beginning of his reign of terror on those men. One after another he would find them, he would bring them to his mother's home and he would poke holes into their heads. The bodies would be dealt with the same way each ten-year-old boy's body had been handled; by the authorities and they would search for whom to pin these murders on. And every time, he would slip under their noses, mockingly trudging a mop around as he listened into their schemes to catch a man that was right in front of their blind eyes.

As far as what to do when he got his twitching clammy hands on Fisher, he would beat the location the others out Fisher and when he was done, he would shove their bodies aside, making room for his next victim. Hemmings hated the term victim. It painted him in a terrible light. He wasn't a bad man, he was a hurt man. At least that's what his roommate Peter liked him to believe. Not that he'd told Peter the entire story of what exactly he'd done to be considered a bad, bad man in the eyes of the public. Hemmings liked to deem his actions as purely taking justice into his own hands and making sure the men that oppressed him redeemed themselves with their blood. With regards to Ethan Daniels, Hemmings was a hero who'd gotten his wires crossed and had to hold on to the one he was saving. But Ethan was not in any danger that was for sure.

He would have returned the boy, at this point he was losing sight of why he hadn't in the first place. Why he'd made the woman he was supposed to return Ethan to take the fall of his crimes. He swallowed, his nerves rattling him. This wasn't the time to deliberate his decisions. He crossed the lawn rather quickly and climbed into his beat up Toyota. He hardly used the old thing. *Because people might recognize it from all the times you used it to pick up little boys...* A voice in his head wailed. That was besides his concern.

He wasn't too far from Providence. And with the blanket of the night running over Charlotte, picking up his old classmate wouldn't be that much of an issue.

Turning the key in the ignition, the small vehicle hummed to life and Hemmings rode the streets itching to get his hands on Fisher. Irrespective of the fact that Fisher hadn't directly been involved in harassing Hemmings, he hadn't done anything to stop it. Fisher had watched, trailing Bert, Jimmy, Chandler and the likes as they publicly mortified Hemmings.

The memories of that afternoon on the playground often burdened Hemmings in a flash, a flutter. In the beginning, he'd returned to Cotswold Elementary, well, the bench looking into the elementary school and he'd beckoned that afternoon to replay before his eyes. Other times he hadn't had much control over the intrusive recollections. In cases like that, Hemmings often found himself a flower plucked from the stem, helpless, vulnerable and dying from the inside out. In his keen focused eyes that trailed the road to Providence, he'd felt the wry sting of brimming tears. He was just a little boy. He'd already had enough going on at home with his father's constant harassment before Momma Hemmings had left that despicable man; all he'd wanted was a school life that didn't make him stop by Briar Creek each afternoon after school, tempted to just walk into the slow flowing waves with a pocket full of rocks and pebbles. To become one with the waves and not have to return to Cotswold Elementary. On the afternoon in question, Hemmings had loitered behind in his classroom. He'd poured his attention into a puzzle he'd stolen from the library when no one had their eyes on him. He was after all the 'oddity' in that school and not many wanted to know that kid or what he was up to. At the time, the thought of heading out underneath the baking sun had his skin crawling. But then Gilbert and Kenny had walked in and tugged him out of class. He wasn't the strongest kid either.

Outside, subject to the scorching glares of his classmates, Alexander Hemmings felt out of place in Cotswold Elementary, in the school system entirely. He hadn't been close enough to hear the mumbles and whispers but he knew they were going on. Why else would Sally Goldberg from three seats ahead turn to Patrick Thompson and mutter something into his ears, her eyes still shadowing a helpless ten-year-old Alexander Hemmings. He knew the tight feeling in his chest, he was like the poor squirrels his father would tape up to empty beer bottles and fire at with his shot gun. Those helpless animals knew what was coming and they couldn't do a thing to alter their fate. That afternoon those boys; Ricky, Ernie, Bert, Chandler, Mikey, Leonard, Gilbert, Kenny, Patrick and Jimmy had burned it into Hemmings back leg with a branding iron and enough bitter words to remind him that he would never fit into their school, society and life as a whole. And maybe they were right.

Hemmings clenched his teeth. This wasn't the time or place for a shimmer in his eyes, for a stained cheek. He didn't want to fit in anymore anyway. He'd grown to like the man he'd become. He was a man that others feared. He only wished Momma Hemmings had lived to see what exactly her dear son had become.

. . .

Lauren and Parker Daniels headed up the foam walled pathway to the thick double-studio doors. Their steps had been muffled by the elongated carpet that stretched out of their dressing room. Lauren had in the time since her sons disappearance found it difficult to adapt to their new situation of just not knowing the whereabouts of their little Ethan Daniels. She'd expected to go through dark times with him, he was after all a growing boy and many of her friends had moaned about their teenage boys running away from home and giving them a near heart attack. But Ethan wasn't

a moody hormonal teenage boy discovering himself, identifying outside his mothers wings; Ethan was a helpless ten-year-old-boy. Haunted by the thought of never getting to see her only child's teenage years, Lauren Daniels had slipped into a depression she was yet to tell anyone about.

And since neither she nor Parker had gotten the feedback they'd sought from their interview with Grace Church for the WCNC, she'd rolled out of bed last night and scheduled an airing with Andrew Hill for channel 3, WBTV. Unlike the first days since Ethan's disappearance, Lauren hadn't been home moping, waiting, and obsessively cleaning her baby boy's room waiting for his arrival. She'd gotten up and poured herself into her work. *A little too much...* The voice in her head nitpicked.

The young mother said nothing to her distant husband, but they'd shared a look—one that wailed of their fallout from the night before—and strode through the thick double-studio doors. One fight after another, their relationship was on the rocks. What had started with pinning the blame on her for relying on a neighbour to watch their only son in a time where ten-year-old boys were kidnapped and killed had turned dark and physical and left her with scars trailing up and down her arms and legs. Not that Lauren was ready to share with anyone else what an angry Parker Daniels would do to her when the sun had been tucked in for the night. No, she wasn't there to report the lengths his temper and loss drove him to. She was there to plead to whoever was listening for her son. They knew the cameras were rolling, but they weren't focused on Lauren or Parker, at least not until the pair had settled down.

They'd been instructed on where to sit and when to turn on their microphones. Lauren had knots in her stomach. The last time, she'd been tongue tied, this time; she was going

to be heard. This time she was going to talk like the strong mother she'd always shown her son that she was.

"The street is settling back down and life goes on, but we know this is anything but the end of the road for distraught parents of Cotswold. And that is why we have with us, parents of the latest potential victim; Lauren and Parker Daniels, and they have quite a few words for those tuning in." Andrew Hill turned to Lauren Daniels who cracked a nervous smile. Andrew Hill had the complex features of a model and the warm eyes of a child. She saw him and she saw a handsome man. "Go ahead Mrs. Daniels."

"Thank you, Hill. I just want to say that I'm at the point where I can't sleep anymore, neither do I want to. I'm up, in bed, tossing and turning, wondering whether or not my little boy is alive, or if on my way to work I'll stumble upon his body floating through Briar Creek. I think the worst thing that can happen to a mother is losing her baby." It was bad, but it wasn't the only thing she had to endure all on her own.

"And we get that Mrs. Daniels; it's practically ripping you to pieces."

"It is." Lauren said.

"We've done these press briefings before. Parker Daniels and I. We've spoken to reporters that in the beginning swarmed our house like hungry flies. And we'd been of the impression that it would bring back our boy." At that time, they'd clung to each other, hoping that things wouldn't get any worse that they wouldn't receive a distressed call from the chief of police notifying them of their son's body washing up from some lake near Cotswold elementary.

"But it didn't." Andrew Hill pointed out. Lauren Daniels nodded slowly.

“We just want to know if he’s okay. We want to know if his needs and wants are being met. And if one day we get the chance to get him back, we just want to know that he’s happy.” She hadn’t once stopped picturing the day she would be reunited with her little Ethan. She’d imagined she’d be overjoyed; she would hug him till she no longer felt the dull ache in her chest. She would be there for every moment of his life and she would watch him like a hawk, just until he grew up and pestered her to give him some space. And even then she would explain to him that there was a point in her life that she had to live without him and within that time she’d been empty. And that if she was pestering him it’s because she wanted him to know just how much he meant to her.

“As parents all you want, all you both want is that your kid isn’t in any danger; he’s healthy, well fed and happy.”

“And I have a theory.” Parker groaned, running his hands over his face. He’d always shut her down when it came to this theory. But he wouldn’t shut her down on live television. She could be heard here by numerous live viewers. Despite his displeasure.

“A theory?” Andrew Hill seemed interested. Lauren Daniels nodded leaning forward in her seat.

“Exactly, Hill. A theory on who could have been behind my son’s kidnapping.” His eyes bulged, and his lips curled up in a small smile. She knew in those eyes he was calculating just how much his ratings would grow with a distraught mother pointing fingers at her killer on live television. But to her this was more than just about the ratings. This was about rescuing her son and getting justice for all he’d endured.

“Who could this person be and what would they have to gain?”

"It's not a surprise that the day my son was taken from me, he was in the custody of a sitter. A neighbour I'd hired to watch my boy." Parker crossed and uncrossed his legs. She could tell he just wanted to be out of there, away from her and her nonsense theories. Well this wasn't nonsense, at least not to her.

"Madison Miller, She's actively in police custody. Although she hasn't been charged the twenty-seven year old is being detained during the investigation as a number of officers believe she had something to do with the kidnap and murder of the ten ten-year-old Cotswold elementary boys."

"I believe she took my son, although not to kill him, but to raise him as her own after her son was kidnapped from her home and killed." Lauren Daniels felt lighter in her chest. She knew there would be backlash when she returned to the confines of her home, Parker wouldn't hold out, but while she was here, that didn't matter. Though she hadn't gotten the expression she'd been anticipating from Andrew Hill. No, he'd rather stared ahead, a finger pressed to the tiny microphone in his ear, and then he turned to her.

"I'm sorry Mrs. Daniels," He returned his attention swiftly back to camera one. "There's been breaking news. It has come to my attention that Cotswold Elementary where these kidnaps and murders had begun will be undergoing an indefinite shut down until these crimes in a sense... blow over." Lauren didn't know what to feel about the closure of the school.

. . .

Back and forth, he could barely hear his own thoughts. Back and forth, he was the only one right outside terminal six awaiting a passenger from Greeneville. They'd spoken over the phone before her flight. She hadn't sounded like herself on the other end of the line, but Adam Walker had let sleeping dogs lie. He'd rather chucked it all up to her

daughter's recent arrest pending a trial that would determine Madison Miller's freedom. A trial that would thoroughly scrutinize the statement she'd made; a trial where the onus of proof rested on the shoulders of the prosecutors to establish a prima facie case. Julia Miller deserved to be involved with her daughter's case. She deserved a chance to speak with Madison.

Adam Walker drew to a stop, a low groan rumbling through his lips. He'd been pained and he'd shared his displeasure with Julia Miller. She hadn't had much to say over the phone, but he had a gut feeling that when she'd settled in, the woman wouldn't exactly hold back her repulsion over the situation. If he were asked what he'd felt stumbling upon an article based on the recently aired broadcast of Lauren Daniels slandering the name of Madison Miller on the WBTV's morning news, Adam Walker wouldn't know how exactly to describe his hurt, frustration and utter helplessness. Lauren Daniels couldn't be farther from the truth, and Adam hated to own up to it, but she wasn't the only one who'd cradled this impression of Madison Miller. The protesters he'd driven past, the ever growing search party strenuously probing Charlotte for the missing ten-year-old Ethan Daniels all seemed to share this perspective. And he could only imagine what Madison would feel coming out, back into society after her trial to this, because he was sure as hell going to get her out, and he wasn't going to overlook his former partner on the force.

Although there was footage linking Ryan Gates to Madison Miller, she still bore the greater burden of the public's dissatisfaction with the current state of affairs. They believed she'd cajoled his involvement in her activities. She hadn't. They refused to see the victim in her. Hemmings, Lauren and the WBTV had cloaked her in the gown of a killer. Adam knew his neighbour was anything but. For heaven's sakes she gave a false statement, swallowing the

bitter pill of a life sentence and probable death for someone else's ten-year-old son.

Despite the distance of the aircrafts from the airport windows, the revving, hissing and whistling of their engines still rippled through the barely occupied airport. It was the middle of September, ten-fifteen in the morning, a time when interstate trips had simmered down to its barest minimum. Adam Walker found very little comfort in his situation, alone at the foot of the terminal nearly deafened by the whining of these planes that claimed to be state-of-the-art. And he'd had to bear with that. At least until once more there'd been a moment of calm and he'd offered yet another jittery glimpse at his watch. *She should be here!* He shoved his hands clammy and cold into his pockets, and rather thought more about his morning conversation with Charlie Wallace.

Adam Walker believed in miracles but not magic, he hadn't held out a thread of hope that Wallace would give him the light of day at the ripe crack of dawn. *In all honesty*, Adam had thought at the time, *what federal officer wants to be brought down to a police station at 7:30 A.M.?* And after minutes outside in that chunked up waiting area of the Charlotte Mecklenburg Police Department - South Division by Corporate Center District listening to the wails of a restless baby, he'd been convinced he'd had to leave, he did later on have to pick up Julia Miller. But not long after Adam had risen from his sticky plastic seat, he'd been called into that tiny grey room and questioned. Charlie Wallace seemed impatient—he wasn't the only one with places to be. Adam Walker had run him through the phone call he'd received from Alexander Hemmings on Madison Miller's phone, what he'd caught in the background, and what he'd sat by the edge of his bed theorising. Adam was convinced Hemmings had made a blunder and called Madison's cell with his. If this were the case, a single phone number could lead the

authorities to the breast of the deranged Alexander Hemmings. And although Wallace had been hesitant to buy into Walker's claims, Adam had been adamant the federal officer collect the number and at his own free will run it through the system. Adam Walker was done boycotting the system. It had never done him right in the past and as he'd sat there, he'd been haunted with the plain as white fact that his friends were detained behind bars in the Mecklenburg County Detention Center because of his resolve to spurn the assistance of the authorities. He had to put it behind him sometime. This was that sometime.

The blare of his phone filtered through the air, loud and splintering. He'd reached for it, his eyes of spring greens still latched onto terminal six entrance, and for some reason, his stomach had been in a knot. A few seconds into the call he knew why. His chest constricted. This couldn't be happening.

Ryan Gates had passed away in his cell at the detention center from deprivation of his medication. He'd died the same way Rebecca Gates had, from a negligence to remain diligent with their medications. However in Ryan Gate's case, Adam Walker's former partner's death had been induced by police brutality.

"Adam Walker?" Julia Miller curiously called out, materializing from terminal six. A single tear the weight of a thousand ran down his left cheek. Ryan Gates had been killed in police custody.

. . .

Chapter Fifteen



Mr. Hemmings, is the boy okay in there?”

Spencer Black strode towards Cotswold Elementary with a calm that was best described as oil in the water of the situation. The evening had faded into a blackness that lit a fire in his gut. It burned away the drabness of the day; clock in, rummage through files and files, sit with report after report of alleged petty crimes committed by the man of the hour—Alexander Hemmings—and as per usual overlook the needy calls of his desperate ex-wife. It was always one thing with Janice, she found an error with the divorce, he wasn’t paying enough child support...And then came the night and a call that ignited the adrenaline that had him flying the streets of Microsoft Way to good old Cotswold Elementary. When his custom black Ford Crown Victoria had pulled to a gradual stop, he’d been met by a swarm of police cars, the evening alive with the slow swirl of red and blue lights from a number of light bars, not overlooking the brisk breeze brushing by, taking with it the last lick of warmth it could. “Agent Black, FBI.” Black called out to an officer that had denied him access into the school. With a nod, the geared up special-operations officer stepped aside.

“We want to know what’s going on in there, Mr. Hemmings.” The closer Spencer Black got to the scene, the louder the reverberation of the Megaphone. He approached the man with the device. It was none other than Officer Todd Wilde. Spencer wasn’t blind to the number of snipers that had crouched low along the ferns and shrubs leading up to the entrance of the elementary school. “If you hurt the boy, it will not end well for you!”

“Special Agent Spencer Black.” Todd Wilde turned and lowered the device from his lips, his eyes running up and down the tired federal officer.

“I know.” Todd returned his attention to the entrance of the school. “Officer Todd Wild.” He introduced.

“Is he talking?” Spencer asked referring to the nut-case they’d stalked to where it all began on the day the eleventh body was supposed to be reported in by a frantic male caller.

“About the boy, no. About his damn childhood, affirmative.”

“Childhood, huh?” Spencer had his hands akimbo on his hips.

“You’ve been briefed?”

“At HQ.”

“He still has the boy?”

“What’s it look like.” Todd Wilde returned his attention to the federal officer, just for a minute.

“I’m not a criminal!” Alexander Hemmings materialized from the doors of the school, not far behind him, seemingly bound by softly clicking and clacking shackles was the teary-eyed ten-year-old-Ethan Daniels. “Every ten-year-old I killed; Tyler Shaw, Jasper Kepper, Chase Maxwell, Sebastian Trey, Grayson Leland, Spencer Brooks, Sheldon Finn, Gibson Knight, Alden Grant and Oliver Weston, all of their deaths were for this little brat!” Hemmings jabbed the barrel of his .38 special at a trembling Ethan Daniels.

“Put the gun down Mr. Hemmings!” Todd Wilde insisted.

“I got justice for him, and I finally have my chance to get justice for myself and you’re all getting in the way of that!” From what Black could tell, Hemmings was getting worked up. He didn’t need that. A cornered suspect was an unstable suspect, especially one with a hostage.

"Lay off him a bit." Spencer ordered Todd Wilde.

"What do you mean lay off him, are you crazy, he'll have that boys head rolling out to us if we do."

"If you make him feel cornered he'll take it out on the boy. We need him alive." Spencer explained. Todd seemed hesitant, lost in thought.

"Well what do you want me to do?"

"Reason with him."

"He has a gun jabbed to the head of a ten-year-old boy who if I might add is gonna' have nightmares till the day he dies." Todd grumbled.

"We can get the kid therapy, I know a great guy down on providence, really affordable. Not that his affluent parents would care the price." Spencer said.

"So what do I tell him, because if by accident that gun goes off on that boys head this is all over. Mission failed."

"What is this fortnight? Grand Theft Auto? If he kills the boy we've got about half a dozen snipers here. His ass is toast." Spencer thought for a second. "How long has he been here?"

"Nine-hours."

"I only have one of those men paying for what they did to me, how they humiliated me. There's nine more. Ricky Fisher was supposed to die next the conning bastard!" Alexander Hemmings was the man behind the tremor that Charlotte had been under for eleven long weeks. The detained suspects Madison Miller and the late Ryan Gates were mere victims. Black wasn't going to hear the end of that when this all blew over.

"Why can't a sniper take him out?"

"As much as possible we don't wanna' scar the kid."

“For fuck sakes, he’ll recover. Hemmings has had the boy under our damn noses here in Cotswold, he probably murdered Lance in the same room he had the boy hostage.”

“Shoot me!” Hemmings chimed. “What’s the point of keeping me alive if I can’t do what I was meant to do since that god forsaken afternoon on the playground! Kill me!” Alexander Hemmings pressed the gun harder on Ethan’s temple. Spencer Black did not like the way things were escalating.

“We’re not going to shoot you, we just want the boy, and you can go after Ricky Fisher.”

“I don’t wanna’ go after him. I want him here. I want all of them here, one by one, so I can kill them on the same playground they killed my innocence. They humiliated me, slandered my family’s name. They made fun of my Momma! She’d been through enough and they threw it back in my face that she was nothing but a pussy!”

“We will bring these men here, but first, release the boy. It’s non-negotiable.”

“Kill me now, or I will kill him!” Hemmings screamed.

The night came alive with boom of a fired shot; a body slumped onto the floor. It wasn’t the ten-year-old Ethan Daniels body, it was Hemmings. It wasn’t a sniper that had taken him out. He’d done it himself. Silence ran across the sea of officers that lined the entrance to Cotswold elementary. And as the dust settled, they saw his body rise and slump, over and over as the frightened boy trudged pathetically slowly, still cuffed to the dead man, towards the gate of his school. It was all over. But the trauma for the young boy was just beginning.

“Ethan!” A voice chirped. Spencer turned, it was Lauren Daniels, still obstructed by a special operations officer and police tape labelled ‘crime scene, do not cross’. In the eyes

of the mother, Black saw sadness on the horizon of a glimmering hope. The woman merely wanted to embrace her son, a little boy who'd been through too much in the span of seven days.

Spencer returned his attention to the boy that was now being released from his bondage to the corpse of Alexander Hemmings by an FBI sniper. He'd almost felt the relief that radiated through the little boy as he ran the remaining distance, pushed through the gated compound, ducked under the neon yellow and black tapes and into his mother's warm waiting arms.

It was over, in eleven weeks, they'd gotten justice for the eleven boys whose lives were forever shattered by a deranged killer. The silver lining, they had one survivor that lived to tell the story, they had Ethan Daniels. Though Spencer knew there were more people involved in this than just the ten boys that deserved justice. There was the late Pedro Sanchez that according to Miss Miller had merely driven into range of Hemmings .38 special, there was Bert Lance who'd only just been recognized by a unhinged lunatic, and there was Madison Miller and the late Ryan Gates who'd been flung under the bus by Hemmings.

There were too many lives Hemmings had affected, Spencer Blacks only relief was that there wouldn't be any more kidnappings, murders and wrongful arrests. It was finally over.

Epilogue

The late nights were the best times to write. Most inmates on her row had settled in. She could hear her own thoughts. She'd spent too long locked up to hold a grudge anymore. She'd been relieved; she'd actually felt the weight lifted from her shoulders when Julia Miller had walked into that tiny grey room and towards that tiny grey table, a shimmering smile on her face and the words *he's free* written in her eyes. That was the only reason she'd been comfortable with her sentence. Why she'd worn the stained orange overall jumpsuit with puffed shoulders.

She was in there, in her cell because she'd done what she'd felt was right. And although she didn't know what awaited her on the outside, she still wrote her letters of application to a number of news stations, and this time she didn't care the ranking. She'd started her journey as a reporter. Young, jittery, at the time, her only concerns had been what to wear to work and how to keep Tucker from causing any more trouble at his school. As at the time her son had been enrolled in Billingsville Elementary on Skyland Avenue. A stretch since she'd lived in Cotswold, but it seemed to be the best fit. If she'd known she would meet the man that would murder her son at that very job, she would have turned it down despite the ranking and ratings.

Madison Miller had been through hell in her perspective. Charlotte had been through hell, Ethan had looked at the devil in the eyes and he'd survived, and she believed that she could tell this story, his story, Charlotte's story when she was eventually released in the spring the following year. She didn't need to get employed while she was detained. That wasn't going to happen, but she needed to know, to let these stations know that despite her status as an ex-convict

when she would be released, she would have what it took to tell a gripping story, because she'd survived one.

She much like Ethan Daniels was a survivor of Alexander Hemmings. And it broke her heart to know Ryan hadn't made it. He'd lost his life, wrongly detained as a primary suspect in the kidnap of Ethan Daniels.

Adam Walker much like Julia Miller had paid her visits, more than one. He'd been there for the span of her sentence. He'd been there telling her stories of his new position on the force as a patrol officer, a position he'd confided in her he wouldn't change for the world.

Madison Miller was going to make it as a reporter here in Charlotte, and she wasn't going to let her status, or what she'd endured stop her. She was going to tell the story she'd lived and it was going to be aired over the finally slumbering city of Charlotte.

The End.